

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE DEVIL COLONY*

JAMES  
ROLLINS

THE  
SKELETON  
KEY

A SHORT STORY EXCLUSIVE

THE SKELETON KEY  
*A Short Story Exclusive*

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She woke with a knife at her throat.

Or so she thought.

Seichan came fully alert but kept her eyes closed, feigning sleep, feeling something sharp slicing into her neck. She instinctively knew not to move. Not yet. Wary, she relied on her senses, but heard no whisper of movement, felt no stirring of air across her bare skin, detected no scent of body or breath that was not her own. She smelled only a hint of roses and disinfectant.

*Am I alone?*

With the sharp pressure still on her neck, she peeked one eye open and took in her environment in a heartbeat. She lay sprawled in an unknown bed, in a room sheâ€™d never seen before. Across the bed, the covers were finely textured brocade; above the headboard, an old tapestry hung; on the mantel over a fireplace, a crystal vase of fresh-cut roses sat beside an eighteenth-century gold clock with a thick marble base. The time read a few minutes past ten, confirmed by a modern clock radio resting atop a walnut bedside table. From the warm tone of the light flowing through the sheer curtains, she assumed it was morning.

She picked out muffled voices, speaking French, a match to the roomâ€™s decor and appointments, passing down the hall outside the room.

*Hotel room*, she surmised.

Expensive, elegant, not what she could afford.

She waited several more breaths, making sure she was alone.

She had spent her younger years running the slums of Bangkok and the back alleys of Phnom Penh, half feral, a creature of the street. Back then, she had learned the rudimentary skills of her future profession. Survival on the streets required vigilance, cunning, and brutality. When her former employers found her, and recruited her from those same streets, the transition to *assassin* proved an easy one.

Twelve years later, she wore another face, an evolution that a part of her still fought, leaving her half formed, waiting for that soft clay to harden into its new shape. But what would she become? She had betrayed her former employers, an international criminal organization called the Guildâ€™but even that name wasnâ€™t real, only a useful pseudonym. The real identity and purpose of the organization remained shadowy, even to its own operatives.

After her betrayal, she had no home, no country, nothing but a thin allegiance to a covert U.S. agency known as Sigma. She had been recruited to discover the true puppet masters of the Guild. Not that she had much choice. She had to destroy her former masters before

they destroyed her.

It was why she had come to Paris, to chase a lead.

She slowly sat up and caught her reflection in a mirror on the armoire. Her black hair was mussed by the pillow, the emerald of her eyes dull, sensitive to the weak morning sunlight.

*Drugged.*

Someone had stripped her down to her bra and panties, likely to search her for weapons or wires or perhaps purely to intimidate her. Her clothes—black jeans, gray T-shirt, and leather motorcycle jacket—had been folded and placed atop a neighboring antique Louis XV chair. On an Empire-period nightstand, her weapons had been arranged in a neat row, making a mockery of their lethality. Her SIG Sauer pistol was still in its shoulder holster, while her daggers and knives had been unsheathed, shining stingingly bright.

As brilliantly as the new piece of jewelry adorning her neck.

The stainless-steel band had been fastened tight and low. A tiny green LED light glowed at the hollow of her throat, where sharp prongs dug deep into that tender flesh.

*So this is what woke me up. . . .*

She reached to the electronic necklace and carefully ran a fingertip along its surface, searching for the mechanism that secured it. Under her right ear, she discovered a tiny pin-sized opening.

A keyhole.

*But who holds the key?*

Her heart thudded in her throat, pinching against those sharp prongs with every beat. Anger flushed her skin, leaving behind a cold dread at the base of her spine. She dug a finger under the tight band, strangling herself, driving the steel thorns deeper until—

—agony lanced through her body, setting fire to her bones.

She collapsed to the bed, contorted with pain, back arched, chest too constricted to scream. Then darkness. . . . *nothingness* . . .

Relief flooded through her as she fell back, but the sensation was short-lived.

She woke again, tasting blood where she had bitten her tongue. A bleary-eyed check of the mantel clock revealed that only a moment had passed.

She rolled back up, still trembling with aftershocks from the near electrocution, and swung her legs off the bed. She kept her hands well away from her neck and crossed to the window, needing to get her bearings. Standing slightly to the side to keep from casting a shadow, she stared below at a plaza at the center of which stood a massive towering bronze column with a statue of Napoleon atop it. An arcade of identical elegant buildings surrounded the square, with archways on the ground floor and tall second-story windows, separated by

ornamental pillars and pilasters.

*Iâ€™m still in Paris. . . .*

She stepped back. In fact, she knew *exactly* where she was, having crossed that same square at the crack of dawn, as the city was just waking. The plaza below was the Place Vendôme, known for its high-end jewelers and fashion boutiques. The towering bronze Colonne Vendôme in the center was a Parisian landmark, made from the melting of twelve hundred Russian and Austrian cannons collected by Napoleon to commemorate some battle or other. Across its surface climbed a continuous ribbon of bas-relief depicting scenes from various Napoleonic wars.

She turned and studied the opulent room, draped in silk and decorated in gold leaf.

*I must still be at the Ritz.*

She had come to the hotel—the Ritz Paris—for an early-morning meeting with a historian who was connected to the Guild. Something major was afoot within the organization, stirring up all her contacts. She knew that such moments of upheaval, when locked doors were momentarily left open and safeguards loosened, were the perfect time to snatch what she could. So she had reached in deep, pushed hard, and risked exposing herself perhaps too much.

One hand gently touched the collar—then lowered.

*Definitely too much.*

One of her trusted contacts had set up this rendezvous. But apparently money only bought so much trust. She had met with the historian in the Hemingway Bar downstairs, a wood-paneled and leather-appointed homage to the American writer. The historian had been seated at a side table, nursing a Bloody Mary, a drink that had originated at this establishment. Next to his chair rested a black leather briefcase, holding the promise of secrets yet to be revealed.

She had a drink.

Only water.

Still a mistake.

Even now, her mouth remained cottony, her head equally so.

As she moved back into the room, a low groan drew her attention to the closed bathroom door. She cursed herself for not thoroughly checking the rest of the room upon first waking, blaming it on the fuzziness of her thinking.

That lack of vigilance ended now.

She stepped silently and swiftly across the room, snatching her holstered pistol off the nightstand. She shook the weapon free as she reached the door, letting the shoulder harness fall silently to the carpet.

She listened at the door. As a second groan—more pained now—

erupted, she burst into the bathroom, pistol raised. She swept the small marble-adorned chamber, finding no one at the sink or vanity.

Then a bony arm, sleeved in tattoos, rose from the tub, waving weakly as if the bather were drowning. A hand found the swan-shaped gold faucet and gripped tightly to it.

As she sidled closer, a skinny auburn-haired boy—likely no more than eighteen—used his hold on the spigot to pull himself into view. He looked all ribs, elbows, and knees, but she took no chances, centering her pistol on his bare chest. Dazed, he finally seemed to see her, his eyes widening at both her half-naked state and the obvious threat of the weapon. He scrambled back in the empty tub, palms held up, looking ready to climb the marble walls behind him.

He wore only a pair of boxer briefs—and a stainless-steel collar.

A match to hers.

Perhaps sensing the same pinched pressure on his neck as Seichan felt on hers, he clawed at his throat.

Don't, she warned in French.

Panicked, he tugged. The green light on his collar flashed to red. His entire body jolted, throwing him a foot into the air. He crashed back into the bathtub. She lunged and kept his head from cracking into the hard marble, feeling a snap of electricity sting her palm.

Her actions were not motivated by altruism. The kid plainly shared her predicament. Perhaps he knew more about the situation than she did. He convulsed for another breath—then went slack. She waited until his eyes fluttered back open; then she stood and backed away. She lowered her gun, sensing no threat from him.

He cautiously worked his way into a seated position. She studied him as he breathed heavily, slowly shaking off the shock. He was taller than she'd at first imagined. Maybe six feet, but rail thin—not so much scrawny as wiry. His hair was long to the shoulder, cut ragged with the cool casualness of youth. Tattoos swathed his arms, spilled over his shoulders, and spread into two dark wings of artwork along his back. His chest was clean, still an empty canvas.

*Comment tu t'appelles?* Seichan asked, taking a seat on the commode.

He breathed heavily. *Je m'appelle Renny .Â . Renny MacLeod.*

Though he answered in French, his brogue was distinctly Scottish.

*You speak English?* she asked.

He nodded, sagging with relief. *Aye. What is going on? Where am I?*

*You're in trouble.*

He looked confused, scared.

*What's the last thing you remember?* she asked.



His voice remained dazed. "I was at a pub. In Montparnasse. Someone bought me a pint. Just the one. I wasn't blotted or anything, but that's the last I remember. Till I woke up here."

So he must have been drugged, too. Brought here and collared, like her. But why? What game was being played?

The phone rang, echoing across the room.

She turned, suspecting the answer was about to be revealed. She stood and exited the bathroom. The padding of bare feet on marble told her that Renny was following. She picked up the phone on the bedside table.

"You're both awake now," the caller said in English. "Good. Time is already running short."

She recognized the voice. It was Dr. Claude Beaupr  , the historian from the Pantheon-Sorbonne University in Paris. She pictured the prim, silver-haired Frenchman seated in the Hemingway Bar. He had worn a threadbare tweed jacket, but the true measure of the man was found not in the cut of his cloth, but within the haughty cloak of his aristocratic air and manners. She guessed that somewhere in the past his family had noble titles attached to their names: *baron*, *marquis*, *vicomte*. But no longer. Maybe that's why he'd become a historian, an attempt to cling to that once-illustrious past.

When she had met him this morning, she'd hoped to buy documents pertaining to the Guild's true leaders, but circumstances had clearly changed.

*Had the man figured out who I am? If so, then why am I still alive?*

"I have need of your unique skills," the historian explained, as if reading her thoughts. "I expended much effort to lure you here to Paris, to entice you with the promise of answers. You almost came too late."

"So this is all a ruse?"

"Non. Not at all, mademoiselle. I have the documents you seek. Like you, I took full advantage of the tumult among our employers   your former, my current   to free the papers you came hunting. You have my solemn word on that. You came to buy them. I am now merely negotiating the price."

"And what is that price?"

"I wish you to find my son, to free him before he is killed."

Seichan struggled to keep pace with these negotiations. "Your son?"

"Gabriel Beaupr  . He has fallen under the spell of another compatriot of our organization, one I find most distasteful. The man is the leader of an apocalyptic cult, *l'Ordre du Temple Solaire*."

"The Order of the Solar Temple," she translated aloud.

Renny MacLeod's face hardened at the mention of the name.



“Oui,” Claude said from the phone. “A decade ago, the cult had been behind a series of mass suicides in two villages in Switzerland and another in Quebec. Members were found poisoned by their own hand or drugged into submitting. One site was firebombed in a final act of purification. Most believed the OTS had dissolved after that” but in fact, they’d only gone underground, serving a new master.

### *The Guild.*

Her former employers often harnessed such madness and honed its violence to serve their own ends.

“But the new leader of OTS” Luc Vennard “has greater ambitions. Like us, he plans to use the momentary loosening of the Guild’s reins to exert his own independence, to wreak great havoc on my fair city. For that reason alone, I’d want him stopped, but he has wooed my son with myths of the continuing existence of the Knights Templar, of the cult’s holy duty to usher in the reign of a new god-king” likely Vennard himself “a bloody transformation that would require fire and sacrifice. Specifically *human* sacrifice. To use my son’s words before he vanished, a *great purging* would herald the new sun-king’s birth.”

“When is this all supposed to take place?” Seichan asked.

“Noon today, when the sun is at its strongest.”

She glanced to the mantel clock. That was in less than two hours.

“That is why I took these extreme measures. To ensure your cooperation. The collars not only punish, but they also kill. Leave the city limits of Paris and you will meet a most agonizing end. Fail to free my son and you will meet the same fate.”

“And if I agree . . . if I succeed . . .”

“You will be set free. You have my oath. And as payment for services rendered, the documents I possess will also be yours.”

Seichan considered her options. It did not take long. She had only one.

### *To cooperate.*

She also understood why Claude BeauprÃ© had collared her and turned her into his hunting dog. He dared not report what he’d learned from his son to the Guild. The organization could simply let Vennard commit this violent act and turn it to their advantage. Chaos often equaled opportunity to her former masters. Or they would stamp out Vennard and his cult for their hubris and mutiny. In either scenario, Gabriel BeauprÃ© would likely end up dead.

So Claude had sought help outside of regular channels.

“What about the boy?” Seichan asked, staring over at Renny MacLeod, unable to fit this one jigsaw piece into the puzzle.

“He is your map and guide.”

“What does that mean?”

Renny must have noted her sudden attention on him and grew visibly paler.

“Search his back,” Claude commanded. “Ask him about Jolienne.”

“Who is Jolienne?”

This time the kid flinched, as if punched in the gut. But rather than going even whiter, his face flushed. He lunged forward, grabbing for the phone.

“What does that bastard know about my Jolie?” Renny cried out.

Seichan easily sidestepped his assault, keeping the phone to her ear and spinning him with one hand. She tossed him facedown on the bed and held him in place with a knee planted at the base of his spine.

He struggled, swearing angrily.

“Stay still,” she said, digging in her knee. “Who is Jolie?”

He twisted his head around to glare at her with one eye. “My girlfriend. She disappeared two days ago. Looking for some group called the Solar Temple. I was in that pub last night trying to drum up a search party among the other *cataphiles*.”

She didn’t know what that last word meant. But before inquiring, her attention focused on the kid’s naked back and the sprawl of his tattoo. This was the first chance she’d had to get a good look at it.

In black, yellow, and crimson inks, a strange map had been indelibly etched into his skin—but it was not a chart of streets and avenues. In meticulous detail, the artwork depicted an intricate network of crisscrossing tunnels, widening chambers, and watery pools. It looked like the map for some lost cavern system. It was also clearly an unfinished work: passages faded into obscurity or ended abruptly at the edges of the tattoo.

“What is this?” she asked.

Renny knew what had drawn her attention. “It’s where Jolie disappeared.”

Claude, still on the phone at her ear, answered her more directly. “It is a map of the Paris catacombs, our city of the dead.”

Fifteen minutes later, Seichan was gunning the engine of her motorcycle and speeding over the twelve stone arches of the Pont Neuf, the medieval bridge that spanned the River Seine. She wove wildly around slower traffic, crossing toward the Left Bank of Paris and aiming for the city’s Latin Quarter.

Seated behind her, Renny clung to her with both arms. He squeezed tightly as she exited the bridge and made a sharp turn into the maze of streets on the far side. She did not slow down. They were

quickly running out of time.

“Take the next right!” Renny yelled in her ear. “Go four blocks. Then we’ll have to continue on foot.”

Seichan obeyed. She had no other guide.

Moments later, they were both running down the Rue Mouffetard, an ancient pedestrian avenue that cut a narrow, winding swath through the Latin Quarter. Buildings to either side dated back centuries. The lower levels had been converted into cafés, bakeries, cheese shops, *crÃƒperies*, and a fresh market that spilled out into the street. All around, merchants hawked their goods while patrons noisily bartered.

Seichan shoved through the bustle, noting the chalkboard menus being filled out, the huge loaves of bread being stacked behind windows. Breathless, winded, she drew in the musky headiness wafting from a tiny *fromagerie* and the fragrant displays of an open-air flower stand.

Still, she remained all too conscious of what lay *beneath* this lively tumult: a moldering necropolis holding the bones of six million Parisians, three times the population above.

Renny led the way with his long legs. His thin form skirted through the crowds with ease. He kept glancing back, making sure he hadn’t lost her.

Back at the hotel, he had found his clothes in the hotel closet: ripped jeans, Army boots, and a red shirt bearing the likeness of the rebel Che Guevara. Additionally, they’d both put on scarves to hide their steel collars. While they got dressed, Seichan had explained their situation, how their lives depended on searching the catacombs to retrieve the historian’s lost son. Renny had listened, asking only a few questions. In his eyes, she noted the gleam of hope behind the glaze of terror. She suspected that the determined pace he set now had little to do with saving his own life and more to do with finding his lost love, Jolie.

Before donning his shirt, he had awkwardly pointed to his lower right shoulder blade. That corner of the tattooed map was freshly inked, the flesh still red and inflamed. “This is what Jolie had discovered, where she had been headed when she disappeared.”

And it was where they were going now, chasing their only lead, preparing to follow in his girlfriend’s footsteps.

Claude BeauprÃ© also believed Jolienne’s whereabouts were important. Her disappearance had coincided with the last day he’d seen his son. Before vanishing, Gabriel had hinted to his father about where Vennard and the other members of his cult were scheduled to gather for the purge. It was this same neighborhood. So when Claude heard about Renny searching for his lost girlfriend in this area, he

began moving his chess pieces together: lowly guide and deadly hunter.

The two were now inextricably bound together, headed toward a secret entrance into the catacombs. Renny had shared all he knew about the subterranean network of crypts and tunnels. How the dark worlds beneath the bright City of Lights were once ancient quarries called *les carrières de Paris*. The ancient excavation burrowed ten stories underground, carving out massive chambers and expanding outward into two hundred miles of tangled tunnels. The quarries had once been at the outskirts of the city, but over time, Paris grew and spread over the top of the old labyrinth, until now half of the metropolis sat atop the mines.

Then in the eighteenth century, city authorities had ordered that the overflowing cemeteries in the center of Paris be dug up. Millions of skeletons—some going back a thousand years—were unceremoniously dumped into the quarries’ tunnels, where they were broken down and stacked like cordwood. According to Renny, some of France’s most famous historical figures were likely interred below: from Merovingian kings to characters from the French Revolution, from Clovis to the likes of Robespierre and Marie Antoinette.

Seichan’s search, though, was not for the dead.

Renny finally turned off the main thoroughfare and ducked down a narrow alley between a coffeehouse and a pastry shop. “This way. The entrance I told ye about is up ahead. Friends’ fellow *cataphiles* should have left us some gear. We always help each other out.”

The alley was so tight they had to pass through it single file. It ended at a small courtyard, surrounded by centuries-old buildings. Some of the windows were boarded up; others showed some signs of life: a small dog piping a complaint, a few strings of drying laundry, a small face peering at them through a curtain.

Renny led her to a manhole cover hidden in a shadowed corner of the courtyard. He fished out a crowbar from behind a trash bin, along with two mining helmets with lamps affixed to their front.

He pointed back to the bin. “They left us a couple o’ flashlights, too.”

“Your *cataphiles*?”

“Aye. My fellow explorers of Paris’s underworld,” he said, letting a little pride shine forth, his brogue thickening. “We come from every corner of the world, from every walk o’ life. Some search the old subways or sewer lines; others go boggin’ and diving into water-filled pits that open into flooded rooms far below. But most—like Jolie and me—are drawn to the unmapped corners of the catacombs.”

He went silent, worry settling heavily to his shoulders, clearly wondering about the fate of his girlfriend.

“Let’s get this open,” Seichan said, needing to keep him moving.

She helped pry open the manhole cover and rolled it aside. A metal ladder, bolted to the wall of the shaft, led down into the darkness. Renny strapped on his helmet. Seichan opted for a flashlight.

She cast a bright beam into the depths.

“This leads down to a long-abandoned section of the sewer system, going back to the mid-1800s,” Renny said, mounting the ladder.

“A sewer? I thought we were going into the catacombs.”

“Aye, we are. Sewers, basements, old wells often have secret entrances into the ancient catacombs. Come on, then, I’ll show ye.”

He climbed down, and she followed. She expected it to smell foul, ripe with the slough of the city above. But she found it only dank and moldy. They descended at least two stories, until at last she was able to step back onto solid footing. She cast her light around. Mortared blocks lined the old sewer’s walls and low ceiling. Her boots sloshed in a thin stream of water along the bottom.

“Over here,” Renny led the way along the sewer with the assurance of a well-schooled rat. After thirty yards, a grated gateway opened to the right. He crossed to it and tugged the gate open. Hinges squealed. “Now through here.”

Crude steps led deeper into the darkness and down to a room that made her gasp. The walls had been painted in a riotous garden of flowers and trees set among trickling waterways and azure pools. It was like stepping into a Monet painting.

“Welcome to the true entrance of the catacombs,” Renny said.

“Who did all of this?” she asked, sweeping her light, noting a few sections marred by graffiti.

He shrugged. “All sorts of dobbers make their way down. Artists, partiers, mushroom farmers. A couple years ago, the *cataphlics*—that’s our name for the police who patrol down there—discovered a large chamber set up as a movie theater, with a big screen, popcorn maker, and carved-out seats. When police investigators returned a day later, they found it all gone. Only a note remained in the middle of the floor, warning “Do not try to find us.” That’s the underworld of Paris. Large sections still remain unexplored, cut off by cave-ins or simply lost in time. *Cataphiles*, like me and my mates, do our best to fill in those blank spots on the old maps, tracking our discoveries, recording every intricacy.”

“Like you’ve done with your tattoo.”

“It was Jolie’s idea,” he said with a sad smile. “She’s a tattoo artist. A dead good one, she is. She wanted to immortalize our journey together underground.”

He went silent again, but only for a moment.

“I met her down below, not far from here, both of us all muddy. We exchanged phone numbers by flashlight.”

“Tell me about that day she disappeared.”

“I had classes to go to. She had the afternoon off and left with another girl, Liesl from Germany. I dinna know her last name. They went down after hearing rumors of some secret group moving through the area.”

“The Order of the Solar Temple.”

“Aye.” He worked the back of his shirt up. “At the base of my neck, you’ll see a room marked with a little flower.”

She peered closer at his tattoo, shining her flashlight. She found the tiny Celtic rose and touched it with a finger.

Renny shivered. “That’s where we are now. We’ll follow Jolie’s map to the newest piece of my tattoo; that was where she’d been headed. She found an entrance into a forgotten section of the labyrinth, but she’d only just begun to explore it when she heard that rumor about the Solar Temple.” He lowered his shirt and pointed to a tunnel leading out. “I know most of the way by heart, but I’ll need help once we’re closer.”

He set off through the dark labyrinth, winding through tunnels and across small rooms and past flooded pits. The walls were raw limestone, sweating and dripping with water. Fossils dotted the surfaces, some polished by previous *cataphiles* to make them stand out, as if the prehistoric past were trying to crawl out of the rock.

The way grew rapidly cooler. Soon Seichan could see her breath. The echoes of their footsteps made it sound as if they were constantly being followed. She stopped frequently, checking warily behind her.

She could see that Renny was growing impatient. “We’re not likely to find anyone down here. Even the *cataflics* rarely come to this remote section. Plus there was a gas leak reported near the tourist area of the catacombs. They’ve been closed for three days.”

She nodded and checked his tattoo again. They were not far from the freshly inked section of his map. “If I’m reading this right, your girlfriend’s new discovery opens along that passage.” She pointed to a narrow tunnel and checked her wristwatch.

*Seventy-two minutes left.*

Anxious, Seichan led the way. She hurried along, looking for the branching side passage marked on the tattoo.

“Stop!” Renny called behind her.

She turned and found him kneeling beside a tumble of stones. She

had walked past the rockfall without giving it a second thought.

Renny pointed his helmet lamp to a rosy arrow chalked above the rock pile. "This is the entrance. Jolie always uses pink chalk."

She joined him and spotted a low tunnel shadowed by the rocks.

Renny crawled on his hands and knees through the opening first. Seichan followed. Within a few yards and a couple of short drops, the way dumped into another tunnel.

As Seichan stood, she saw more shafts and smaller side passages heading off in several directions.

Renny touched a palm against the sweating dampness of the limestone wall. "This is definitely a very old section of the catacombs. And it looks to be a fousty maze from here." He twisted around and fought to raise his shirt. "Check the map."

She did, but the ink of the tattoo stopped at the exact point where they were standing. A cursory exam of the tunnels offered no other chalked clues as to where Jolie might have gone.

From here, it looked like they were on their own.

"What do we do?" Renny asked, fear for his girlfriend frosting his words. "Where do we go?"

Seichan picked a tunnel and headed out.

"Why are we going this way?" he asked, hurrying after her.

"Why not?"

Actually she had a reason for the decision. She had picked the passage because it was the only one that headed *down*. By now, it was clear to her that these tunnel crawlers were drawn to nether regions of the world, driven by curiosity about what lay below. Such snooping always kept them digging *deeper*. Only after reaching the bottom would they begin exploring outward.

She hoped that this was true of Jolienne.

Within a few steps, though, Seichan began to regret her choice. To either side, deep niches had been packed solidly with old human bones, darkened and yellowed to the color of ancient parchment. The skeletons had been disarticulated and separated into their component parts, as if inventoried by some macabre accountant. One niche held only a stack of arms, delicately draped one atop the other; another was full of rib cages. It was the last two niches—one on either side of the passage—that disturbed her the most. Two walls of skulls stared out at the tunnel, seeming to dare them to trespass between their vacant gazes.

Seichan hurried past with a shiver of dread.

The tunnel finally ended at a cavernous chamber. While the roof was no higher than the passageway, it stretched outward into a vast room the length of a football field. Rows and rows of pillars held up the ceiling, like some stone orchard. Each support was composed of



stone blocks, one piled on another. Several looked crooked and ready to fall.

“This is the ancient handiwork of Charles Guillaumot,” Renny said, speaking in a rushed, nervous tone. “Back in 1774, a major section of the catacombs collapsed, swallowing up several streets and killing lots of people. After that, King Louis hired himself an architect, Guillaumot, to shore up the catacombs. He became the first true *cataphile*. He mapped and explored most of the tunnels and had these room pillars put in place. Not that collapses don’t still happen. In 1961, the ground opened up and swallowed an entire Parisian neighborhood, killing a bunch of people. Even today, cave-ins occur every year. It’s a big danger down here.”

Seichan only half listened to Renny’s story. A glint off one of the pillars had drawn her attention. The reflection was too bright for this dank and dreary place. She approached the pillar and discovered a ring of wires wrapped around the middle of the stack of stones, linking transmitters and blasting caps to fistfuls of yellowish-gray clay.

*C4 explosive.*

This was not the handiwork of that eighteenth-century French architect.

She examined the bomb, careful not to disturb it. A small red LED light glowed from the transmitter, awaiting a signal. She cupped a hand over her flashlight and motioned for Renny to do the same with his helmet lamp.

The room plunged into darkness. As her eyes adjusted, she picked out the telltale pinpoints glowing across the room, hundreds of them, coming from pillars throughout the chamber. The entire room had been mined to explode.

“What is all of this?” Renny whispered beside her.

“Vennard’s purge,” Seichan surmised, picturing the bustling city above.

She wondered how many other chambers across this necropolis were similarly set with explosives. She remembered Renny mentioning a reported gas leak. Such a ruse would be a good way to evacuate the catacombs, leaving the cult free to plant charges throughout this subterranean world.

Renny must have feared the same. His voice grew somber with the implication. “They could bring half of Paris crashing down.”

Claude Beauprê had said Vennard wanted human sacrifice, to herald the birth of a new sun-king in fire and blood. Here was that plan about to come to fruition.

As she kept her hand cupped over her flashlight, her eyes acclimated themselves enough to note a wan glow from across the room, marking the entrance to a tunnel on the far side.

She continued across the chamber, heading for that light. She slipped out her pistol and pointed it forward. Keeping her flashlight muffled in her other hand, she allowed just enough illumination to avoid obstacles. Renny kept behind her with his helmet's lamp switched off.

The far tunnel was a mirror to the first one. Bones filled niches; the skeletons again broken down and separated into body parts. Only these bones were bright *white*. There was no patina of age. With growing horror, she realized that what she was looking at were not ancient remains—they were the remains of fresh kills.

One niche, a yard deep, was half full of skulls.

A work in progress.

From their tiny sizes, she could tell that some of the skulls had belonged to children, even infants.

Before Claude had finished his instructions over the phone, he had spoken of a heinous act committed by the former head of the *Ordre du Temple Solaire* in Quebec. The man had sacrificed his own son, stabbing him with wooden stakes, believing the child was the Antichrist. Apparently the order's taste for infanticide was not limited to that single instance.

The tunnel ended after another bend. Voices echoed from there, sounding like they were coming from another cavernous space. Seichan motioned for Renny to hang back. She edged forward, hugging a wall, and peered around the corner.

Another room—smaller, but similarly dotted with pillars—opened ahead. Only the pillars in this room were natural limestone columns, left behind as the miners dug out this chamber, making the space feel more ancient. But like the others, these pillars were similarly decorated with explosive charges.

In the center of the room, Seichan could make out twenty people gathered in a circle, all on their knees—but they were not adorned in ceremonial robes. They wore ordinary street clothes. One couple, arm in arm, had come in formal attire for the momentous occasion. A handful looked drugged, weaving dully where they knelt or with their foreheads lowered to the floor. Three bodies lay sprawled closer to the tunnel where Seichan was hiding: facedown, in pools of blood, as dark as oil against the rock. It looked as if they'd been shot in the back as they tried to flee the coming destruction, likely having had second thoughts about giving up their lives in a suicidal orgy.

A pair of guards, with assault rifles and wearing Kevlar body armor, stood to either side of the gathering, shadowed by pillars, watching the group, ready to discourage any other deserters.

Seichan ignored them for the moment and focused on the two figures standing in the center of the circle. One, with silver hair and

Gallic features, wore a cloaked white robe, shining in a spotlight thrown by a nearby sodium lamp. Seichan could hear the soft chug of a generator powering the room. The man smiled beatifically upon his flock, arms raised.

*That must be Luc Vennard.*

“The time is at hand,” he intoned in French. “As the sun reaches its zenith, the destruction wrought here will start. The screams of the dying, the rising souls of the dead, will carry you all upward to the next exultant stage of existence. You will become my dark angels as I claim my solar throne. I promise you: this is not the end, but only the beginning for us all. I must leave you now, but my chosen spiritual right hand will take my place and lead you out of the darkness and into the dawn of a new era.”

The man stepped aside, clearly planning to abandon his flock. From the way Vennard cast a glance toward the two armed guards, it seemed he wasn’t sticking around for the festivities and had arranged for escorts to guide him out of the catacombs—just in case any of the flock objected to his departure. She suspected the bank accounts of those gathered had been emptied into Vennard’s vaults, ready to finance his next venture, to spread more widely the Order of the Solar Temple—or perhaps to buy that new yacht he’d had his eye on.

Was he a cultist, a con artist, or merely a glorified serial killer?

From the vacuous sockets of the dead staring out at her from the nearby niche, she suspected the answer was *all of the above*.

Vennard waved the second man forward. In his midthirties, he wore street clothes, his face shining with a sheen of sweat, his eyes glassy from what appeared to be both drugs and adoration. Even without the photo that Claude had left in the hotel room, Seichan would have recognized the historian’s son—both from his patrician features and the aristocratic air he shared with his father. Seichan pictured Claude plying his son with tales of past noble titles and lost heritages, instilling in the boy the same sense of bitter entitlement that motivated himself. But while the father had sought solace in the embrace of history, it seemed his son had looked to the future, seeking his own path to that former glory.

And he’d found it here.

“Gabriel—like the angel that is your namesake—you will be transformed by blood and sacrifice into my warrior angel, the most exultant of my new heavenly legion. And your weapon will be a sword of fire.” Vennard parted his cloak to reveal a steel short sword. It looked like an antique, a museum piece. “Like you, this steel will soon burn with the energies of the sun’s furnace. But first that weapon must be forged, made ready for its transformation. It must be

bloodied like all of you. This last death by your hand, this singular sacrifice, will herald the others to come. This honor I give to you, my warrior angel, my Gabriel.

Vennard held up the sword and offered it to the young man.

Gabriel took it and lifted it high—then the two men stepped aside, revealing a low altar behind them. It had its own spotlight, too.

A dark-haired woman was chained naked to the stone, legs spread wide, arms outstretched. A second sacrifice—blond-haired and pale—knelt nearby, shaking in a thin white shift.

On the altar, the woman's head was lolling in a drugged daze. But she must have sensed what was to come and struggled against the chains as Gabriel turned to her with his sword. He stepped far enough aside to reveal the woman's face—but the tattoos across her body were already enough to identify her.

At least for one of them.

—Jolienne!

Renny's cry shot out of the tunnel like a crossbow's bolt.

All eyes turned in their direction.

Before Seichan could move, a large figure stepped across the mouth of the tunnel—a *third* guard. He'd been hidden to the side, ensuring no one left. She silently cursed Renny. With no time to devise a strategy, she simply had to improvise.

As the guard raised his rifle, Seichan shot him in the knee. The pop of her pistol was explosive in the confined space. The .357 round at such close range blew out his kneecap in a mist of blood and bone.

She leaped as the guard screamed and toppled forward. She caught him up, embracing him with one arm like a long-lost lover, and used her momentum to carry him into the room. She pointed her SIG Sauer past his body and targeted the guard to the right as he stepped clear of the pillar. She shot him in the face.

Screams erupted across the room. The flock scattered to all sides, like a flushed covey of quail. The remaining guard fired at her, strafing wildly, but she used her new —lover— as a body shield, bulldozing forward. Rounds pelted into the man's Kevlar armor, but one bullet struck the back of his head. His struggling weight went suddenly limp.

She carried the deadweight another two steps, enough to get a good angle around the pillar. She fired at the exposed man, squeezing the trigger twice. She clipped the guard's ear, knocking his head back. The second shot ripped through his exposed throat, severing his spine. He crashed to floor.

Seichan dropped the guard in her arms and took up a shooter's stance, aiming toward the altar. Vennard had retreated behind it. Gabriel, still dazed and slow to react from the drugs he'd ingested,

looked confused. He still held the sword at the throat of the bound woman. A trickle of blood flowed from where the blade's razored edge had already sliced that tender skin.

The other sacrifice, unguarded now, leaped to her feet and fled away. Seichan waved the blond woman toward the exit as she came running at her—only too late did Seichan notice the dagger clutched in the woman's hand.

With a scream of rage, she lunged at Seichan.

Unable to get clear in time, Seichan twisted to the side, ready to take the knife strike to the shoulder, rather than somewhere more vital.

It proved unnecessary.

Before the dagger could hit, something flew past Seichan's shoulder and cracked the woman square in the face. A white human skull bounced to the stone floor and rolled away. From the corner of her eye, she spotted Renny running over, clutching another skull in his fist. He'd clearly grabbed the only weapons at hand from one of the niches.

His attack caused the woman to stumble, long enough for Seichan to get her pistol around and fire point-blank into the woman's chest. The impact knocked her assailant off her feet. She slid across the floor, a bloom of blood brightening the front of her white shift.

Renny came rushing up. He tossed aside the skull and snatched one of the guard's assault rifles from the floor, but from the way he bungled with it, it looked like he'd been better off with the skull. Renny stared down at the dead woman, his face a mask of confusion. The reason for his bewilderment became clear a second later.

From the altar, Gabriel cried out, pain cutting through his drugged haze. *Lies! Lies!*

Seichan recognized that name. It was the German girl Renny had mentioned during his recounting of Jolienne's disappearance. The two girls had come down here, exploring together, when Jolienne disappeared. It now seemed that the circumstances surrounding that disappearance weren't as much a matter of accident as it appeared. Renny's girlfriend hadn't stumbled upon the cult's location here—she'd been lured, led by Liesl like a cow to the slaughter, to be the final sacrifice.

*Non!* Gabriel wailed, heartbroken. With his eyes fixed on the bloody body, he fell to his knees, the sword clattering to the altar.

Others of the flock began to flee out the tunnel, abandoning their leader. But Vennard was not giving up so easily.

From a pocket of his robe, he pulled out what looked like a transmitter. A green light glowed at the top. He had a finger pressed to a button.

“If I let go of this switch, we all die,” he said calmly, his voice resonating with that hypnotic quality that had so easily swayed the gullible. He stepped around the altar. “Let me go. Even follow me out, if you’d like. And we can all still live.”

Seichan backed away and waved Renny aside. Despite Vennard’s grandiose vision, he was not suicidal. She took him at his word. He would refrain from blowing up the catacombs, at least until he himself got clear.

Vennard studied her, attempting to read her. A good cult leader needed a keen eye to judge people, to predict their actions. He slowly moved forward, step-by-step, toward the exit, pushing Seichan ahead of him.

“You want to live as much as any of us, Seichan. Yes, it took me a moment, but I recognize you now. From what I’ve read, you were always reasonable. None of us need to die this.”

A sword burst from the center of his chest, thrust through from behind.

“We must *all* die!” Gabriel yelled as Vennard fell to his knees. “Lies! cannot ascend without the proper sacrifice. Blood and fire. You said so. To become the angels you promised!”

Gabriel shoved the sword deeper as madness, grief, and exaltation glowed in his face. Blood poured from Vennard’s mouth.

Seichan dropped her pistol and lunged forward, grabbing for the transmitter with both hands. She got her finger over the trigger before Vennard could let go. Nose to nose, he stared back at her, his eyes shining with disbelief and shock—but also with understanding.

In the end, he had reaped what he had sown.

Gabriel yanked back on the hilt and kicked away Vennard’s body to free the blade. Seichan fell to her backside, getting tangled as the cult leader fell on top of her. Gabriel raised his sword high with both hands, ready to plunge it into Seichan.

But Renny stepped behind him and cracked him in the back of the skull with the butt of his rifle. Gabriel’s eyes rolled back, and his body crumpled to the floor.

“What a loony bampot,” Renny said.

He came forward to help Seichan up, but she waved to the altar. “Go free Jolienne.”

He stared down at the transmitter clutched in her hands. “Is it over?”

Seichan caught the glint of steel shining above his scarf.

“Not yet.”

With the midday sun cresting high overhead, Seichan waited beside the parked Peugeot 508 sedan in front of the Ritz Paris. The rental had been arranged by Dr. Claude Beauprêtre to transport them

from the Latin Quarter to the rendezvous back at the hotel.

As a precaution, she kept the sedan between her and the doors to the hotel. Additionally, she had Renny retreat to the square of the Place Vendôme. Jolienne was safe at a local hospital, having the cut on her neck treated. He had wanted to stay with her, but Seichan still needed him.

The doors to the Ritz Paris finally opened and discharged a trio of figures. In the center strode Claude, dressed again in tweeds, but he'd donned a rakish hat to shadow his features, clearly as cautious as Seichan about this very public meeting. It would not be good for him to be found associated with a Guild assassin-turned-traitor. He was flanked by two massive men in black suits and long overcoats, surely hiding an arsenal of weapons within those folds.

Claude offered her the barest nod of greeting.

She stepped around to the rear of the sedan to meet him. She kept her hands in the open, offering no threat. Claude motioned for the two men to stay on the curb as he joined her at the back of the car. He carried a black leather Louis Vuitton briefcase.

The historian squinted up into the bright sky, shading his eyes with his free hand. "It is noon, and Paris still stands. I assume that means Luc Vennard's plan failed, his *great purge* quashed."

Seichan shrugged. By now, Renny's *cataflics*, the elite police of that subterranean world, were likely scouring the catacombs, accompanied by the city's *d'Amineurs*, their bomb squads.

"And what of Monsieur Vennard?" Claude asked.

"Dead."

A small smile of satisfaction graced his features. He glanced to the darkened windows of the sedan. "And according to your brief phone call, you rescued my son."

Seichan stepped to the rear of the Peugeot sedan and pressed the zero in the silver 508 emblem beside the taillight. The hidden button popped open the trunk. Within its roomy interior lay Gabriel Beaupr , his limbs bound with duct tape and a ball gag secured in place with her own cashmere scarf. Gabriel winced at the sudden brightness, then struggled when he spotted his father.

Interrupting the family reunion, Seichan slammed the trunk closed. She didn't want anyone passing by to note what was happening. Neither did Claude, who raised no objections to her abrupt gesture. He dared not attempt to free his bound son from the trunk in such a public space.

"As you can see, Gabriel is fine," she said, and held up the sedan's electronic fob. "And here is the key to his freedom."

Claude reached for it but she pulled her hand away.

*Not so fast.*



She tugged down her jacket's collar and exposed the steel one beneath it.

“What about this?” She also nodded over to Renny, who still had his scarf in place. “An exchange of keys. Your son's freedom for ours.”

“*Oui*. That was the deal. I am a man of my word.” He reached into a pocket and removed a hotel key card. He placed it on the top of the trunk. “Inside your hotel room, you will find what you need to free yourselves.”

He must have read the suspicion on her face and smiled sadly.

“Fear not. Your deaths will not serve me. In fact, I plan to pin Vennard's loss upon your traitorous shoulders. With the Guild hunting you, no suspicions will be cast my way. And the faster you run, *ma chère amie*, the better it is for all of us. But, as an additional sign of good faith, I believe I promised you a reward.”

He swung the briefcase onto the trunk and ran a hand over the rich leather surface. “Vuitton's finest. The Président Classeur case. It is yours to keep.” He smiled over at her with amusement and French pride. “But I suspect what is *inside* is the true price for my son's freedom. A clue to the shadowy leaders of the Guild.”

He snapped open the case to reveal a stack of files. On the top folder, imprinted onto the cover, was the image of an eagle with outstretched wings, holding an olive branch in one talon and a bundle of arrows in the other. It was the Great Seal of the United States.

*But what does this have to do with the Guild?*

He snapped the briefcase closed and slid it toward her.

“What you do with this information—where it will lead—will be very dangerous territory to tread,” he warned. “It might serve you better to simply walk away.”

*Not a chance.*

She took the case and the hotel key card. With the prizes in hand, she placed the sedan's fob on the trunk and backed to the curb, well out of the reach of Claude's guards.

The historian didn't make a move to take the sedan's key. Instead, he placed a palm tenderly on the trunk's lid. His eyes closed in relief as the tension drained from his shoulders. He was no longer a Guild associate, merely a father relieved at the safe return of his prodigal son. Claude took a long breath, then motioned for one of his men to retrieve the key and take the wheel. As his guards climbed into the front seats, Claude ducked into the back, perhaps to be that much closer to his son.

Seichan waited for the sedan to pull away from the curb and head down the street.

As the car vanished out of the square, Renny crossed over to join

her. “Did ye get what ye wanted?”

She nodded, picturing the relief Claude must be feeling. For the sake of his son, the historian couldn’t risk that she might have searched the papers first. They had to be authentic.

“Do ye think he can be trusted?” Renny asked, reaching to his scarf.

“That remains to be seen.”

As they both stared across the plaza, Renny took off his cashmere neckpiece and revealed a close-guarded secret, a secret that Seichan had kept from Claude.

Renny’s throat was bare.

He rubbed at the red burn from his earlier shock. “It was good to get that bloody thing off.”

Seichan agreed. She reached to her throat and unsnapped her own collar. She stared down at the green LED light. After Vennard’s death, she’d found herself with an extra hour before the noon deadline. Taking advantage of the additional time in the catacombs, Seichan had reached out to Renny’s network of resources. He’d claimed that his fellow *cataphiles* came from all around the world and from every walk of life.

Upon her instructions, Renny had sent out a clarion call for help. One of the *cataphile* brothers responded, an expert in electrical engineering and microdesign. He was able to get the collars off and removed the shocking mechanism from Seichan’s. This was all done underground, where Claude was unlikely to be able to receive any warning signals from the collars.

Once free, Seichan risked making a play for the briefcase.

As she stared at her collar now, Renny’s early question played in her head: *Could Claude still be trusted?*

The answer came a moment later.

The green light on her collar flashed to red as it received a transmitted signal, but with the shocking mechanism neutralized, there was no danger.

At least, not for her.

Distantly, a tremendous blast echoed across the city. She searched in the direction of the departed sedan and watched an oily tendril of smoke curl into the bright blue sky.

In the end, it seemed that Claude could *not* be trusted. Apparently, despite his claims otherwise, it was too dangerous to let her live, and he had transmitted the kill order to the collars.

A bad move.

She had given Claude the chance to do the right thing.

He hadn’t taken it.

She pictured the scarf securing Gabriel’s ball gag. Hidden

beneath the cashmere and snapped snugly around the young man's mouth and head was Renny's missing electronic collar. The ball gag was formed out of a molded wad of C4, retrieved from one of the explosive charges in the catacombs. The collar had been wired into a detonator. If and when the electronic collar was jolted, it would set off the C4. She had calculated the quantity and shaped the explosive to take out the sedan and its occupants with little collateral damage.

She sighed, feeling a twinge of regret.

It was a nice car.

Renny gaped at the smoke signal in the sky, stunned, one hand clutching his throat. He finally tore his eyes away and faced her. "What now?"

She dumped the collar into a curbside trash bin and hefted up the briefcase. She remembered Claude Beaupr's last words to her. *What you do with this information where it will lead will be very dangerous territory to tread.*

As she turned away, she answered Renny's question.

*What now?*

"Now comes the hard part."

## Whatâ€™s True, Whatâ€™s Not

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At the end of my full-length novels, I love to spell out whatâ€™s real and whatâ€™s fiction in my stories. I thought Iâ€™d do the same here.

â€¢ **The Ritz Paris.** Iâ€™ve never been there, but the details are as accurate as I could make them: from the Hemingway Bar (where the Bloody Mary was invented) to the gold-plated swan faucets in the bathroom.

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â€¢ **The Order of the Solar Temple.** This is a real apocalyptic cult started in 1984 by Luc Jouret and Joseph DiÂ Mambro. It was originally titled *lâ€™Ordre International Chevaleresque de Tradition Solaire* and eventually simplified to *lâ€™Ordre du Temple Solaire*. The group was notorious for its mass suicides and human sacrifice, including the murder of a founderâ€™s infant son in Quebec.

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â€¢ **The Paris Catacombs.** Every detail about the place is true. They spread for 180 miles in a network of tunnels and rooms beneath the City of Lights, mostly throughout the southern *arrondissements* (districts) that make up the Left Bank of the city. The history of collapses and instability is all real, as are the details of the cat-and-mouse game waged between the *cataphiles* and *cataflics*. And, yes, the catacombs are full of disarticulated skeletons that date back a thousand years. And lots of strange things happen down there: from mushroom growing to chambers full of elaborate wall art. New entrances, tunnels, and rooms to this subterranean world are continually being discovered by explorers. Even the story of the mysterious movie theater found underground is true.

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â€¢ **The Peugeot 508.** Yes, that is how you open the trunk: by pressing the zero in the 508 emblem. I hated to blow it up.

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So that ends this adventure, but a large one is looming ahead as this story continues in *The Devil Colony* (hitting bookshelves on June 21, 2011). The papers found in that hard-won briefcase will set off a chain of events that will change Sigma foreverâ€”and even alter how you view the very founding of America.

## An Excerpt from *The Devil's Colony*

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THE DEVIL COLONY  
*A Î£ Sigma Force Novel*

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**James Rollins**

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WILLIAM MORROW

*An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers*

Every schoolchild knows the name of THOMAS JEFFERSON, the architect and scribe of the Declaration of Independence, the man who helped establish a nation out of a scatter of colonies in the New World. Volumes have been written about the man over the past two centuries, but of all the Founding Fathers of America, he remains to this day wrapped in mystery and contradictions.

For instance, it was only in 2007 that a coded letter, buried in his papers, was finally cracked and deciphered. It was sent to Jefferson in 1801 by his colleague at the American Philosophical Society—a colonial-era think tank promoting science and scholarly debate. The group was especially interested in two topics: developing unbreakable codes and investigating mysteries surrounding the native tribes who populated the New World.

Jefferson was fascinated to the point of fixation on Native American culture and history. At his home in Monticello, he put together a collection of tribal artifacts that was said to rival those held in museums of the day (a collection that mysteriously disappeared after his death). Many of these Indian relics were sent to him by Lewis and Clark during their famed expedition across America. But what many don't know is that Jefferson sent a secret message to Congress in 1803 concerning Lewis and Clark's expedition. It revealed the true hidden purpose behind the journey across the West.

Within these pages, you'll learn that purpose. For there is a secret history to the founding of America of which only a few have knowledge. It has nothing to do with freemasons, Knights Templar, or crackpot theories. In fact, a clue hangs boldly in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol. Within that noble hall hangs the famous painting by John Turnbull, *Declaration of Independence* (a work overseen by Jefferson). It depicts each man who signed that famous document—but what few ever note is that Turnbull painted five extra men into that painting, men who never signed the Declaration of Independence. Why? And who were they?

For answers, keep reading.



In this new millennium, the next big leap in scientific research and industry can be summarized in one word: NANOTECHNOLOGY. In a nutshell, it means manufacturing at the atomic level, at a level of one billionth of a meter. To picture something so small, look at the period at the end of this sentence. Scientists at Nanotech.org have succeeded in building test tubes so tiny that 300 billion of them would fit within that one period.

And that nanotechnology industry is exploding. It is estimated that this year alone \$70 billion worth of nanotech products will be sold in the United States. Nano-goods are found everywhere: toothpaste, sunscreen, cake icing, teething rings, running socks, cosmetics, medicines, even Olympic bobsleds. Currently close to ten thousand products contain nanoparticles.

Whatâ€™s the downside of such a growth industry? These nanoparticles can cause illness, even death. UCLA scientists have found that nano-titanium oxide (found in childrenâ€™s sunscreens and many other products) can trigger damage to animals at the genetic level. Carbon nanotubes (found in thousands of everyday products, including childrenâ€™s safety helmets) have been shown to accumulate in the lungs and brains of rats. Also, weird and unexpected things happen at this small level. Take aluminum foil. Itâ€™s harmless enough and convenient for wrapping up leftovers, but break it down into nanoparticles, and it becomes explosive.

Itâ€™s a new and wild frontier. There is presently no requirement for the labeling of nano-goods, no required safety studies of products containing nanoparticles. But thereâ€™s an even darker side to this industry. This technology has a history that goes back further than the twentieth centuryâ€”much further. To find out where this all began and to discover the dark roots of this â€œnewâ€ science .Â .Â .

.Â .Â . Keep reading.

## Prologue

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*Autumn 1779*

*Kentucky Territory*

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The skull of the monster slowly revealed itself.

A shard of yellowed tusk poked through the dark soil.

Two muddled men knelt in the dirt on either side of the excavated hole. One of them was Billy Preston's father; the other, his uncle. Billy stood over them, nervously chewing a knuckle. At twelve, he had begged to be included on this trip. In the past, he'd always been left behind in Philadelphia with his mother and his baby sister, Nell.

Pride spiked through him even to be standing here.

But at the moment it was accompanied by a twinge of fear.

Maybe that was due to the sun sitting low on the horizon, casting tangled shadows over the encampment like a net. Or maybe it was the bones they'd been digging up all week.

Others gathered around: the black-skinned slaves who hauled stones and dirt; the primly dressed scholars with their ink-stained fingers; and of course, the cryptic French scientist named Archard Fortescue, the leader of this expedition into the Kentucky wilderness.

The latter—with his tall bony frame, coal-black hair, and shadowed eyes—scared Billy, reminding him of an undertaker in his black jacket and waistcoat. He had heard whispered rumors about the gaunt fellow: how the man dissected corpses, performed experiments with them, traveled to far corners of the world collecting arcane artifacts. It was even said he had once participated in the mummification of a deceased fellow scholar, a man who had donated his body and risked his immortal soul for such a macabre endeavor.

But the French scientist had come with credentials to support him. Benjamin Franklin had handpicked him to join a new scientific group, the American Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge. He had apparently impressed Franklin in the past, though the exact details remained unknown. Additionally, the Frenchman had the ear of the new governor of Virginia, the man who had ordered them all to this strange site.

It was why they were still here—and had been for so long.

Over the passing weeks, Billy had watched the surrounding foliage slowly turn from shades of copper to fiery crimson. The past few mornings had begun to frost. At night, winds stripped the trees, leaving skeletal branches scratching at the sky. At the start of each day, Billy had to sweep and rake away piles of leaves from the dig site. It was a constant battle, as if the forest were trying to rebury what lay exposed to the sun.

Even now, Billy held the hay-bristled broom and watched as his fatherâ€”dressed in muddy breeches, his shirtsleeves rolled to the elbowsâ€”cleared the last of the dirt from the buried treasure.

â€œWith great care now .Â .Â .â€”Fortescue warned in his thick accent. He swept back the tails of his jacket to lean closer, one fist on his hip, the other hand leaning on a carved wooden cane.

Billy bristled at the implied condescension in the Frenchmanâ€™s manner. His father knew all the woods, from the tidewaters of Virginia to remote tracts of Kentucky, better than any man. Since before the war, his father had been a trapper and trader with the Indians in these parts. Heâ€™d even once met Daniel Boone.

Still, Billy saw how his fatherâ€™s hands shook as he used brush and trowel to pick and tease the treasure out of the rich forest loam.

â€œThis is it,â€”his uncle said, excited. â€œWe found it.â€”

Fortescue loomed over the kneeling men. â€œ*Naturellement*. Of course it would be buried here. Buried at the head of the serpent.â€”

Billy didnâ€™t know what they were seekingâ€”only his father and uncle had read the sealed letters from the governor to the Frenchmanâ€”but he knew what Fortescue meant by â€œthe serpent.â€”

Billy glanced away from the hole to survey the breadth of the site. Theyâ€™d been excavating an earthen mound that wound and twisted away through the forest. It stood two yards high, twice that wide, and ran two thousand feet through the woods and over the gentle hills. It looked like a giant snake had died and been buried where it fell.

Billy had heard about such earthen mounds. Embankments such as these, along with many more man-made hills, dotted the wilderness of the Americas. His father claimed the long-lost ancestors of the regionâ€™s savages had built them, that they were sacred Indian burial mounds. It was said that the savages themselves had no memory of the ancient mound builders, only myths and legends. Stories continued to abound of lost civilizations, of ancient kingdoms, of ghosts, of vile cursesâ€”and, of course, of buried treasures.

Billy shifted closer as his father unearthed the object, wrapped in what appeared to be a thick hide of skin, the black coarse fur still intact. A musky scentâ€”a heavy mix of loam and beastâ€”welled up, overpowering even the smell of venison stew from the neighboring cook fires.

â€œBuffalo hide,â€”his father determined, glancing over to Fortescue.

The Frenchman nodded for him to continue.

Using both hands, his father gently peeled away a flap of the hide to reveal what had lain hidden for ages.

Billy held his breath.

Since the founding of these lands, many Indian mounds had been

dug up and looted. All that had been found were the buried bones of the dead, along with a few arrowheads, hide shields, and shards of Indian pottery.

So why was this particular site so important?

After two months of meticulously surveying, mapping, and digging, Billy was still none the wiser as to *why* they had been directed to come here. Like the looters of other barrows, all his father's team had to show for their meticulous work was a collection of Indian tokens and artifacts: bows, quivers, lances, a massive cooking pot, a pair of beaded moccasins, an elaborate headdress. And, of course, they found bones. Thousands and thousands of them. Skulls, ribs, leg bones, pelvises. He'd overheard Fortescue estimate at least a hundred men, women, and children must have been buried here.

It was a daunting endeavor to collect and catalog everything. It had taken them all the way to the edge of winter to work from one end of the winding mound to the other, painstakingly stripping down the Indian burial mound layer by layer, sifting through dirt and rock until, as the Frenchman said, they'd reached the head of the serpent.

His father unfolded the buffalo skin. Gasps spread among those gathered here. Even Fortescue took a sharp intake of breath through his pinched nose.

Across the inner surface of the preserved hide, a riotous battle had been drawn. Stylized figures of men on horseback raced across the hide, many bearing shields. Spears stabbed with splashes of crimson dyes. Arrows flew. Billy swore he could hear the whoops and war cries of the savages.

Fortescue spoke as he knelt down. A hand hovered over the display. "I've witnessed such handiwork before. The natives would tan the buffalo skin with a mash of the beast's own brains, then apply their pigment with a hollowed-out piece of its own bone. But, *mon Dieu*, I've never seen such a masterpiece as this. Look how each horse is different from another, how each warrior's garb is painted in such detail."

The Frenchman's hand shifted next to hover over what the hide had protected all these years. "And I've never seen anything like this."

The skull of the monster was laid bare. Earlier, they had excavated the broken tusks of the beast, poking out of the hide-wrapped package. The cranium, exposed now to the light of day, was as large as a church bell. And like the buffalo hide, the bone of the skull had also been adorned, become a canvas for some prehistoric artist.

Across its surface, figures and shapes had been carved into the bone and painted so brightly they looked wet to the touch.

Billy's uncle spoke, full of awe. "The skull. It's a mammoth, isn't it? Like those found over at Big Salt Lick."

"No. It's not a *mammoth*," Fortescue said, and pointed with the tip of his cane. "See the curve and length of the tusks, the giant size of its masticating teeth. The anatomy and conformation of the skull are different from the mammoth specimens of the Old World. Remains such as these are 'unique to the Americas' have been reclassified as a *new* species, a beast called a *mastodon*."

"I don't care what it's called," his father commented forcefully. "Is this the *right* skull or not? That's what I want to know."

"There is only one way to find out."

Fortescue reached and ran his index finger along the bony crest of the skull. The tip of his finger sank into a hole near the back. Over the years, Billy had dressed enough deer and rabbit carcasses to know the hole looked too clean to be natural. The Frenchman used that purchase and pulled up.

Another round of gasps spread outward. Several of the slaves fell back in horror. Billy's eyes widened as the top of the monster's skull split into two halves, opening like the doors of a cabinet. With his father's help, Fortescue gently pushed back the two pieces of the cranium each two inches thick and as large as dinner platters.

Even in the meager sunlight, what lay inside the skull glinted brightly.

"Gold," his uncle choked out, shocked.

The entire inside of the skull had been plated in the precious metal. Fortescue ran a finger along the inner surface of one of the bony halves. Only now did Billy notice the bumps and grooves across the gold surface. It looked to be a crude map, with stylized trees, sculpted mountains, and snaking rivers. The surface was also inscribed with hen scratches that might be writing.

Leaning closer, he heard Fortescue mumble one word, full of awe and a flicker of fear. "Hebrew."

After the initial shock wore off, his father spoke at Billy's elbow: "But the skull is empty."

Fortescue turned his attention to the open cavity of the gold-lined cranium. The space was large enough to cradle a newborn baby inside, but as his father had noted, it was empty.

Fortescue studied the cavity, his face unreadable, but behind his eyes, Billy saw his mind churning on unfathomable calculations and speculations.

*What had they expected to find?*

Fortescue stood up. "Close it back up. Keep it wrapped in the hide. We need it ready for transport to Virginia within the hour."

No one argued. If word spread of gold here, the place would surely be ransacked. Over the next hour, as the sun sank below the horizon and torches were lit, men worked quickly to free the massive skull. A wagon was prepared, horses readied. Billy's father, his uncle, and the Frenchman spent much of that time with their heads bent together.

Billy crept close enough with his broom to eavesdrop on their conversation, pretending to be busy. Still, their voices were too low to pick out more than a few words.

"It may be enough," Fortescue said. "A place to start. If the enemy finds it before us, your young union will be doomed before it has even begun."

His father shook his head. "Then maybe it best be destroyed now. Set a bonfire here. Burn the bone to ash, melt the gold to slag."

"It may come to that, but we'll leave such a decision to the governor."

His father looked ready to argue with the Frenchman, but then caught Billy hovering nearby. He turned and lifted an arm to shoo Billy off and opened his mouth to speak.

Those words never came.

Before his father could speak, his throat exploded in a spray of blood. He fell to his knees, clutching at his neck. An arrowhead poked from under his jaw. Blood poured between his fingers, bubbled from his lips.

Billy ran toward his father, regressing from young man to child in a dark instant. "Papa!"

In shock, his ears went deaf. The world shrank to include only his father, who stared back at him, full of pain and regret. Then his father's body jerked, again and again, and toppled forward. Feathers peppered his back. Behind the body, Billy saw his uncle kneeling, head hanging. A spear had cleaved clean through his chest from behind, its point buried in the dirt, its shaft propping the dead body up.

Before Billy could comprehend what he was seeing, what was happening, he was struck from the side—not by an arrow or spear, but by an arm. He was knocked to the ground and rolled. The impact also snapped the world back into full focus.

Shouts filled his ears. Horses screamed. Shadows danced amid torches as scores of men fought and grappled. All around, arrows sang through the air, accompanied by savage whoops.

An Indian attack.

Billy struggled, but he was pinned under the Frenchman. Fortescue hissed in his ear. "Stay down, boy."

The Frenchman rolled off him and flew to his feet as a half-naked

savage, his face painted in a red mask of terror, came flying toward him, a hatchet raised high. Fortescue defended with his only weapon, as meager as it might be—his cane.

As the length of carved oak swung to point at the attacker, it parted near the handle. A sheath of wood flew from the cane's tip, revealing a sword hidden at its core. The empty sheath struck the savage in the forehead and caused him to stumble in his attack. Fortescue took advantage and lunged out, skewering the attacker through the chest.

A guttural scream followed. Fortescue turned the man's momentum, and dropped the savage beside Billy on the ground.

The Frenchman yanked his sword free. "To me, boy!"

Billy obeyed. It was all his mind would allow. He had no time to think. He struggled up, but a hand grabbed his arm. The bloody savage sought to hold him. Billy tugged his arm loose.

The Indian fell back. Where the hand had clutched his sleeve, a smeared handprint remained. Not blood, Billy realized in a flash.

*Paint.*

He stared down at the dying savage. The palm that had clutched him was as white as a lily, though some of the paint was sticking to creases in the palm.

Fingers clamped onto his collar and pulled him to his feet.

Billy turned to Fortescue, who still kept hold of him. "They . . . they're not Indians," he sobbed out, struggling to understand.

"I know," Fortescue answered with nary a bit of fright.

All around, chaos continued to reign. The last two torches went dark. Screams, prayers, and pleas for mercy echoed all around.

Fortescue hauled Billy across the encampment, staying low, stopping only long enough to gather up the loose buffalo hide, which he shoved at Billy. They reached a lone horse hidden deeper in the woods, tethered to a tree, already saddled as if someone had anticipated the attack. The horse stamped and threw its head, panicked by the cries, by the smell of blood.

The Frenchman pointed. "Up you go. Be ready to fly."

As Billy hooked a boot into the stirrup, the Frenchman vanished back into the shadows. With no choice, Billy climbed into the saddle. His weight seemed to calm the horse. He hugged his arms around the mount's sweaty neck, but his heart continued to pound in his throat. Blood rushed through his ears. He wanted to clamp his hands over those ears, to shut out the bloody screams, but he strained to see any sign of approach by the savages.

*No, not savages,* he reminded himself.

A branch cracked behind him. He twisted around as a shape

limped into view. From the cape of his jacket and the glint of his sword, he could see it was the Frenchman. Billy wanted to leap off the horse and clasp tightly to the man, to force him to make some sense of the bloodshed and deceit.

Fortescue stumbled up to him. The broken shaft of an arrow stuck out of the man's thigh, just above the knee. As he reached Billy's side, he shoved two large objects up at him.

“Take these. Keep them bundled in the hide.”

Billy accepted the burdens. With a shock, he saw it was the crown of the monster's cranium, split into two halves, bone on one side, gold on the other. Fortescue must have stolen them off the larger skull.

*But why?*

With no time for answers, he folded the two platters of gold-plated bone into the buffalo hide in his lap.

“Go,” Fortescue said.

Billy took the reins but hesitated. “What about you, sir?”

Fortescue placed a hand on his knee, as if sensing his raw terror, trying to reassure him. His words were firm and fast. “You and your horse have enough of a burden to bear without my weight. You must fly as swiftly as you can. Take it where it will be safe.”

“Where?” Billy asked, clenching the reins.

“To the new governor of Virginia.” The Frenchman stepped away. “Take it to Thomas Jefferson.”



## PART I

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*Trespass*

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## Chapter 1

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*Present Day*

*May 18, 1:32 P.M.*

*Rocky Mountains, Utah*

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It looked like the entrance to hell.

The two young men stood on a ridge overlooking a deep, shadowy chasm. It had taken them eight hours to climb from the tiny burg of Roosevelt to this remote spot high in the Rocky Mountains.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Trent Wilder asked.

Charlie Reed took out his cell phone, checked the GPS, then examined the Indian map drawn on a piece of deer hide and sealed in a clear plastic Ziploc bag. “I think so. According to the map, there should be a small stream at the bottom of this ravine. The cave entrance should be where the creek bends around to the north.”

Trent shivered and brushed snow from his hair. Though a tapestry of wildflowers heralded the arrival of spring in the lowlands, up here winter still held a firm grip. The air remained frigid, and snow frosted the surrounding mountaintops. To make matters worse, the sky had been lowering all day, and a light flurry had begun to blow.

Trent studied the narrow valley. It seemed to have no bottom. Down below, a black pine forest rose out of a sea of fog. Sheer cliffs surrounded all sides. While he had packed ropes and rappelling harnesses, he hoped he wouldn’t need them.

But that wasn’t what was truly bothering him.

“Maybe we shouldn’t be going down there,” he said.

Charlie cocked an eyebrow at him. “After climbing all day?”

“What about that curse? What your grandfather?”

A hand waved dismissively. “The old man’s got one foot in the grave and a head full of peyote.” Charlie slapped him in the shoulder. “So don’t go crapping your pants. The cave probably has a few arrowheads, some broken pots. Maybe even a few bones, if we’re lucky. Come on.”

Trent had no choice but to follow Charlie down a thin deer trail they’d discovered earlier. As they picked their way along, he frowned at the back of Charlie’s crimson jacket, emblazoned with the two feathers representing the University of Utah. Trent still wore his high school letterman jacket, bearing the Roosevelt Union cougar. The two of them had been best friends since elementary school, but lately they’d been growing apart. Charlie had just finished his first year at college, while Trent had gone into full-time employment at his dad’s auto-body shop. Even this summer, Charlie would be participating in an internship with the Uintah Reservation’s law

group.

His friend was a rising star, one that Trent would soon need a telescope to watch from the tiny burg of Roosevelt. But what else was new? Charlie had always outshone Trent. Of course, it didn't help matters that his friend was half Ute, with his people's perpetual tan and long black hair. Trent's red crew cut and the war of freckles across his nose and cheeks had forever relegated him to the role of Charlie's wingman at school parties.

Though the thought went unvoiced, it was as if they both knew their friendship was about to end as adulthood fell upon their shoulders. So as a rite of passage, the two had agreed to this last adventure, to search for a cave sacred to the Ute tribes.

According to Charlie, only a handful of his tribal elders even knew about this burial site high in the Uintas Wilderness. Those who did were forbidden to speak of it. The only reason Charlie knew about it was that his grandfather liked his bourbon too much. Charlie doubted his grandfather even remembered showing him that old deer-hide map hidden in a hollowed-out buffalo horn.

Trent had first heard the tale when he was in junior high, huddled in a pup tent with Charlie. With a flashlight held to his chin for effect, his friend had shared the story. "My grandfather says the Great Spirit still haunts this cave. Guarding a huge treasure of our people."

"What sort of treasure?" Trent had asked doubtfully. At the time he had been more interested in the *Playboy* he'd sneaked out of his father's closet. That was treasure enough for him.

Charlie had shrugged. "Don't know. But it must be cursed." "What do you mean?"

His friend had shifted the flashlight closer to his chin, devilishly arching an eyebrow. "Grandfather says whoever trespasses into the Great Spirit's cave is never allowed to leave."

"Why's that?"

"Because if they do, the world will end."

Right then, Trent's old hound dog had let out an earsplitting wail, making them both jump. Afterward, they had laughed and talked deep into the night. Charlie ended up dismissing his grandfather's story as superstitious nonsense. As a modern Indian, Charlie went out of his way to reject such foolishness.

Even so, Charlie had sworn Trent to secrecy and refused to take him to the place marked on the map "until now."

"It's getting warmer down here," Charlie said.

Trent held out a palm. His friend was right. The snowfall had been growing heavier, the flakes thickening, but as they descended, the air had grown warmer, smelling vaguely of spoiled eggs. At some point, the snowfall had turned to a drizzling rain. He wiped his hand on his

pants and realized that the fog he'd spotted earlier along the bottom of the ravine was actually *steam*.

The source appeared through the trees below: a small creek bubbling along a rocky channel at the bottom of the ravine.

"Smell that sulfur," Charlie said with a sniff. Reaching the creek, he tested the water with a finger. "Hot. Must be fed by a geothermal spring somewhere around here."

Trent was unimpressed. The mountains around here were riddled with such baths.

Charlie stood up. "This must be the right place."

"Why's that?"

"Hot spots like this are sacred to my people. So it only makes sense that they would pick this place for an important burial site." Charlie headed out, hopping from rock to rock. "Câmon. We're close."

Together, they followed the creek upstream. With each step, the air grew hotter. The sulfurous smell burned Trent's eyes and nostrils. No wonder no one had ever found this place.

With his eyes watering, Trent wanted to turn back, but Charlie suddenly stopped at a sharp bend in the creek. His friend swung in a full circle, holding out his cell phone like a divining rod, then checked the map he'd stolen from his grandfather's bedroom this morning.

"We're here."

Trent searched around. He didn't see any cave. Just trees and more trees. Overhead, snow had begun to frost on the higher elevations, but it continued to fall as a sickly rain down here.

"The entrance has got to be somewhere nearby," Charlie mumbled.

"Or it could just be an old story."

Charlie hopped to the other side of the creek and began kicking at some leafy ferns on that side. "We should at least look around."

Trent made a half-assed attempt on his side, heading away from the water. "I don't see anything!" he called back as he reached a wall of granite. "Why don't we just?"

Then he saw it, out of the corner of his eye as he turned. It looked like another shadow on the cliff face, except a breeze was combing through the valley, setting branches to moving, shadows to shifting.

Only this shadow didn't move.

He stepped closer. The cave entrance was low and wide, like a mouth frozen in a perpetual scowl. It opened four feet up the cliff face, sheltered under a protruding lip of stone.

A splash and a curse announced the arrival of his friend.

Trent pointed.

“It’s really here,” Charlie said, sounding hesitant for the first time.

They stood for a long moment, staring at the cave entrance, remembering the stories about it. They were both too nervous to move forward, but too full of manly pride to back away.

“We doing this?” Trent finally asked.

His words broke the stalemate.

Charlie’s back stiffened. “Hell yeah, we’re doing this.”

Before either of them could lose their nerve, they crossed to the cliff and climbed up into the lip of the cave. Charlie freed his flashlight and pointed it down a tunnel. A steep passageway extended deep into the mountainside.

Charlie ducked his head inside. “Let’s go find that treasure!”

Bolstered by the bravado in his friend’s voice, Trent followed,

The passageway narrowed quickly, requiring them to shuffle along single file. The air was even hotter inside, but at least it was dry and didn’t stink as much.

Squeezing through a particularly tight chute, Trent felt the heat of the granite through his jacket.

“Man,” he said as he popped free, “it’s like a goddamn sauna down here.”

Charlie’s face shone brightly. “Or a sweat lodge. Maybe the cave was even used by my people as one. I bet the source of the hot spring is right under our feet.”

Trent didn’t like the sound of that, but there was no turning back now.

A few more steep steps and the tunnel dumped into a low-roofed chamber about the size of a basketball court. Directly ahead, a crude pit had been excavated out of the rock, the granite still blackened by ancient flames.

Charlie reached blindly to grab for Trent’s arm. His friend’s grip was iron, yet it still trembled. And Trent knew why.

The cavern wasn’t empty.

Positioned along the walls and spread across the floor was a field of bodies, men and women, some upright and cross-legged, others slumped on their sides. Leathery skin had dried to bone, eyes shriveled to sockets, lips peeled back to bare yellowed teeth. Each was naked to the waist, even the women, their breasts desiccated and lying flat on their chests. A few bodies had been decorated with headdresses of feathers or necklaces of stone and sinew.

“My people,” Charlie said, his voice croaking with respect as he edged closer to one of the mummies.

Trent followed. “Are you sure about that?”

In the bright beam of the flashlight, their skin looked too pale, their hair too light. But Trent was no expert. Maybe the mineral-rich heat that had baked the bodies had also somehow bleached them.

Charlie examined a man wearing a ringlet of black feathers around his neck. He stretched his flashlight closer. "This one looks red."

Charlie wasn't talking about the man's skin. In the direct glare of the beam, the tangle of hair around the dried skull was a ruddy auburn.

Trent noted something else. "Look at his neck."

The man's head had fallen back against the granite wall. The skin under his jaw gaped open, showing bone and dried tissue. The slice was too straight, the cause plain. The man's shriveled fingers held a shiny metal blade. It still looked polished, reflecting the light.

Charlie swung his flashlight in a slow circle around the room. Matching blades lay on the stone floor or in other bony grips.

"Looks like they killed themselves," Trent said, stunned.

"But why?"

Trent pointed to the only other feature in the room. Across the chamber, a dark tunnel continued deeper into the mountain. "Maybe they were hiding something down there, something they didn't want anyone to know about?"

They both stared. A shiver traveled up from Trent's toes and raised goose bumps along his arms. Neither of them moved. Neither of them wanted to cross this room of death. Even the promise of treasure no longer held any appeal.

Charlie spoke first. "Let's get out of here."

Trent didn't argue. He'd seen enough horror for one day.

Charlie swung around and headed toward the exit, taking the only source of light.

Trent followed him into the tunnel, but he kept glancing back, fearing that the Great Spirit would possess one of the dead bodies and send it shuffling after them, dagger in hand. Focused as he was behind him, his boot slipped on some loose shale. He fell hard on his belly and slid a few feet down the steep slope back toward the cavern.

Charlie didn't wait. In fact, he seemed anxious to escape. By the time Trent was back on his feet and dusting off his knees, Charlie had reached the tunnel's end and hopped out.

Trent started to yell a protest at being abandoned—but another shout, harsh and angry, erupted from outside. Someone else was out there. Trent froze in place. More heated words were exchanged, but Trent couldn't make them out.

Then a pistol shot cracked.

Trent jumped and stumbled two steps back into the darkness.

As the blast echoed away, a heavy silence was left in its wake.

*Charlie .Â .Â : ?*

Shaking with fear, Trent retreated down the tunnel, away from the entrance. His eyes had adjusted enough to allow him to reach the chamber of mummies without making a sound. He stopped at the edge of the cavern, trapped between the darkness at his back and whoever was out there.

Silence stretched and time slowed.

Then a scraping and huffing echoed down to him.

*Oh no.*

Trent clutched his throat. Someone was climbing into the cave. With his heart hammering, he had no choice but to retreat deeper into the darkness—but he needed a weapon. He stopped long enough to pry the knife from a dead man’s grip, snapping fingers like dried twigs.

Once armed, he slipped the blade into his belt and picked his way across the field of bodies. He held his arms ahead of him, blindly brushing across brittle feathers, leathery skin, and coarse hair. He pictured bony hands reaching for him, but he refused to stop moving.

He needed a place to hide.

There was only one refuge.

*The far tunnel.Â .Â .*

But that frightened him.

At one point, his foot stepped into open air. He came close to screaming—then realized it was only the old fire pit dug into the floor. A quick hop and he was over it. He tried to use the pit’s location to orient himself in the darkness, but it proved unnecessary.

Light grew brighter behind him, bathing the chamber.

Now able to see, he rushed headlong across the cavern. As he reached the mouth of the tunnel, a thudding, tumbling sounded behind him. He glanced over his shoulder.

A body came rolling out of the passageway and sprawled facedown on the floor. The growing light revealed the embroidered feathers on the back of the body’s crimson jacket.

Charlie.

With a fist clamped to his lips, Trent fled into the sheltering darkness of the tunnel. Fear grew sharper with every step.

*Do they know I’m down here, too?*

The tunnel ran flat and smooth, but it was far too short. After only five scared steps, it widened into another chamber.

Trent ducked to the side and flattened against the wall. He fought to control his ragged breathing, sure it would be heard all the way outside. He risked a peek back.

Someone had entered the mummy chamber with a flashlight. In the jumbling light, the shape bent down and dragged his friend’s

body to the edge of the fire pit. It was only one person. The murderer dropped to his knees, set down his flashlight, and pulled Charlie's body to his chest. The man raised his face to the roof and rocked, chanting something in the Ute language.

Trent bit off a gasp, recognizing that lined and leathery face.

As he watched, Charlie's grandfather raised a polished steel pistol to his own head. Trent turned away but was too slow. The blast deafened in the confined space. Half of the old man's skull exploded in a spray of blood, bone, and gore.

The pistol clattered to the stone. The old man fell heavily over his grandson's body, as if protecting him in death. A slack arm struck the abandoned flashlight, nudging it enough to shine directly at Trent's hiding place.

He slumped to his knees in horror, remembering the superstitious warning from Charlie's grandfather: *Whoever trespasses into the Great Spirit's cave is never allowed to leave.*

The tribal elder had certainly made that come true for Charlie. He must have somehow learned about the theft of the map and tracked them here.

Trent covered his face with his palms, breathing hard between his fingers, refusing to believe what he had witnessed. He listened for anyone else out there. But only silence answered him. He waited a full ten minutes.

Finally satisfied that he was alone, he pushed back to his feet. He looked over his shoulder. The flashlight's beam pierced to the back of the small cave, revealing what had been hidden here long ago.

Stone crates, each the size of a lunch box, were stacked at the back of the chamber. They appeared to be oiled and wrapped in bark. But what drew Trent's full attention rose in the center of the room.

A massive skull rested atop a granite plinth.

*A totem*, he thought.

Trent stared into those empty sockets, noting the high domed cranium and the unnaturally long fangs. Each had to be a foot long. He had learned enough from his old earth sciences classes to recognize the skull of a saber-toothed tiger.

Still, he couldn't help but be stunned by the strange state of the skull. He had to tell someone about the murder, the suicide—but also about this treasure.

*A treasure that made no sense.*

He hurried headlong down the tunnel, passed through the mummy chamber, and ran toward daylight. At the entrance to the cave, he paused, remembering the final warning from Charlie's grandfather, about what would happen if someone trespassed here and left.

*The world will come to an end.*



Teary-eyed, Trent shook his head. Superstitions had killed his best friend. He wasn't about to let the same happen to him.

With a leap, he fled back into the world.

## Chapter 2

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May 30, 10:38 P.M.

High Uintas Wilderness

Utah

Â

*Nothing like murder to draw a circus.*

Margaret Grantham crossed the makeshift camp set up in a high meadow overlooking the ravine. She huffed a bit in the thin air, and the arthritis in her knuckles still throbbed from the cold. A gust of wind threatened to rip the hat from her head, but she held it in place, tucking away a few strands of gray hair.

All around, tents sprawled across several acres, broken up into various factions, from law enforcement to local media. A National Guard unit stood by to keep the peace, but even its presence only added to the tension.

Native American groups from across the country had been gathering steadily over the past two weeks, drawn by the controversy to the remote location, hiking or riding in on horseback. They came under the auspices of several different acronyms: NABO, AUNU, NAG, NCAI. But ultimately all the letters served one purpose: to protect Native American rights and to preserve tribal heritage. Several of the tents were tepees, constructed by the more traditional groups.

She scowled as a local news helicopter descended toward an open field on the outskirts of the camp, and shook her head. Such attention only made things worse.

As an anthropology professor at Brigham Young University, she had been summoned by the Utah Division of Indian Affairs to help mediate the legal dispute about the discovery in this area. Since she'd spent thirty years overseeing the university's Native American outreach program, local tribes knew her to be respectful of their causes. Plus, she often worked alongside the popular Shoshone historian and naturalist Professor Henry Kanosh.

Today was no exception.

Hank waited for her at the trailhead that led down toward the cavern system. Like her, he wore boots, jeans, and a khaki work shirt. His salt-and-pepper hair had been tied back in a ponytail. She was one of the few who knew his Indian name, *Kaivâ€™u wuhnuh*, meaning Mountain Standing. At the moment, standing at the trailhead, he looked the part. Closing in on sixty, his six-foot-four frame remained solid with muscle. His complexion was granite, only softened by the dancing flecks of gold in his caramel eyes.

His dog—a stocky, trail-hardened Australian cattle dog with one blue eye and one brown—sat at his side. The dog's name, Kawtch,

came from the Ute Indian word for "ceno." Maggie smiled as she remembered Hank's explanation: *Since I was yelling it at him so much as a pup, the name sort of stuck.*

"So what's the pulse like out there?" Hank asked as she joined him with a quick hug of hello.

"Not so good," she answered. "And likely to get worse."

"Why?"

"I was speaking to the county sheriff earlier. Tox report came back on the grandfather."

Hank bit harder on the cigar clamped between his teeth. He never lit his stogies, just liked chewing on them. It was against Mormon practices to use tobacco, but sometimes concessions had to be made. Though full-blooded Native American, he had been raised Mormon, one of the northwestern band of Shoshone who had been baptized back in the 1800s after the Bear River massacre.

"And what was in the tox report?" he asked around his cigar.

"The old man tested positive for peyote."

Hank shook his head. "Great. That'll play right for the cameras. Crazy Injun hopped on drugs kills his grandson and himself during a religious frenzy."

"For now, they're keeping that detail under wraps, but it'll eventually come out." She sighed in resignation. "The reaction to the initial report was bad enough."

County law enforcement had been the first on the scene to investigate the murder-suicide of the young Ute and his grandfather. With an eyewitness—a friend of the murdered boy—the case had been quickly closed, the bodies shipped by helicopter to the state morgue in Salt Lake City. The initial coroner's report blamed the tragedy on dementia secondary to chronic alcohol poisoning. Afterward, op-ed pieces appeared in both local and national papers, weighing in on the abuse of alcohol among Native Americans, often reinforcing the caricature of the drunken Indian.

It wasn't helping matters here. Margaret knew the delicacy with which such issues had to be broached, especially here in Utah, where the history of Indians and white men was bloody and strained.

But that was only the edge of the political quagmire. There was still the matter of the *other* bodies found down in the cave, hundreds of mummified remains.

Hank waved toward the path down to the cave. His dog took the lead, trotting with his bushy tail high. Hank followed. "The surveyors compiled their report this morning. Did you see it?"

She shook her head as she joined him on the trail.

"According to the surveyors, the cave entrance is on federal land, but the cavern system extends under reservation territory."

“Effectively blurring the jurisdiction line.”

He nodded. “Not that it’ll make much difference in the long run. I read the brief filed by Indian Affairs. All this land, going back to 1861, was once part of the Uintah and Ouray Indian Reservation. But over the past century and a half, the borders of this reservation have waxed and waned.”

“Which means Indian Affairs can still make a strong case that the contents of the cavern belong to them.”

“That still depends on the other variables: the age of the bodies, when they were interred, and of course, if the remains are even Native American.”

Maggie nodded. It was the main reason she had been summoned here: to evaluate the racial origins of those bodies. She had already conducted a cursory physical examination yesterday. Based on skin tone and hair color and facial bone structure, the remains appeared to be Caucasian, but the artifacts and clothing were distinctly Indian. Any further testing—DNA analyses, chemical tests—were locked up in a legal battle. Even moving the bodies was forbidden due to an injunction imposed by NAGPRA, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.

“It’s like Kennewick Man all over again,” Maggie said.

Hank raised a questioning brow toward her.

“Back in 1996, an old skeleton was discovered along a riverbank in Kennewick, Washington. The forensic anthropologist who first examined the remains declared them to be Caucasoid.”

Hank glanced to her and shrugged. “So?”

“The body was carbon-dated at over nine thousand years old. One of the oldest bodies discovered in the Americas. The Caucasian features triggered a storm of interest. The current model of North America puts early man migrating to the region across a land bridge from Russia to Alaska. The discovery of an ancient skeleton bearing Caucasoid traits contradicts that assessment. It could rewrite the history of early America.”

“So what happened?”

“Five local Indian tribes claimed the body. They sued to have the bones reinterred without examination. That legal battle is still going on a decade later. And there’ve been other cases, other Caucasoid remains found in North America, and fought over just as fiercely.” She ticked them off on her fingers. “The Spirit Cave Mummy of Nevada, Oregon’s Prospect Man, Arlington Springs Woman. Most of these bodies have never been properly tested. Others were lost forever in anonymous Indian graves.”

“Let’s hope we don’t end up with such a mess here,” Hank said.

By now, theyâ€™d reached the bottom of the chasm. Kawtch waited for them, panting, tongue lolling, tail still high.

Maggie grimaced at the rotten-egg smell rising from the sulfurous spring that heated the valley. Her face had already beaded up with sweat. She fanned herself with one hand.

Hank noted her discomfort and hurried them toward the cave entrance. Two National Guard soldiers stood at their posts, armed with rifles and holstered sidearms. With all the publicity, grave robbing remained a major concern, especially with the reported treasure hidden in the cave.

One of the guards stepped forwardâ€”a fresh-faced young man with rusty-blond stubble. Private Stinson had been posted here all week and recognized the two approaching scientists.

â€œMajor Ryan is already inside,â€ he said. â€œHeâ€™s waiting for the two of you before moving the artifact.â€

â€œGood,â€ Hank said. â€œThereâ€™s already enough tension up there.â€

â€œAnd cameras,â€ Maggie added. â€œIt wonâ€™t look good to have someone in a U.S. military uniform seen absconding with a sacred Native American artifact. This has to be handled with some diplomacy.â€

â€œThatâ€™s what Major Ryan figured.â€ The private stepped asideâ€”then added under his breath, â€œBut heâ€™s getting impatient. Didnâ€™t exactly have kind words for whatâ€™s going on here.â€

*So what else is new?*

Major Ryan had proven to be a thorn in her side.

Hank helped lift Maggie up to the raised entrance to the burial cave. His large hands clamped hard to her hips, triggering a flush of heat through her body, along with a surge of bittersweet memory. Those same hands had once run over her naked body, a short tryst, born of long nights together and a deep friendship. But in the end, such a relationship hadnâ€™t suited them. They were better friends than lovers.

Still, her cheeks heated to a fierce glow by the time he joined her, hopping easily up into the mouth of the cave. He seemed oblivious to her reaction, which made her both grateful and slightly hurt.

He ordered Kawtch to stay outside. The dog hung his head with disappointment.

They set off into the tunnel as a muffled shout echoed up to them. Maggie and Hank shared a glance. Hank rolled his eyes. As usual, Major Ryan was not happy. The head of the unit had no interest in the anthropological importance of this discovery and plainly resented this assignment. Plus, she suspected there was an undercurrent of racial

tension. Sheâ€™d overheard a remark from him about the Native Americans gathered at the camp: *Shouldâ€™ve driven â€™em all into the Pacific when we had the chance.*

Still, she had to work with the manâ€™at least until the treasure was secured. It was one of the reasons she and Hank had been given permission to move the totem artifact and ship it to the museum at BYU. It was too valuable to leave unguarded. Once it was gone, the amount of security could be scaled back, and hopefully some of the simmering resentment up above would calm down.

Maggie reached the main chamber, pausing at the threshold, again taken aback by the macabre spectacle of the mummified remains. Bright battery-powered lamps lit the space. Surveying strings and yellow crime-scene tape divided the chamber into sections. A cordoned-off path crossed the floor and led to the far tunnel.

She headed toward it, but her attention was again drawn to the bodies around her. Their state of preservation was amazing. The sustained geothermal heat had baked the fluid out of the remains, drying the tissues and concentrating the salts in the bodies, which acted as a natural brining agent.

For the thousandth time, she wondered why they had all killed themselves. It reminded her of the story of the siege of Masada, where Jewish rebels had committed suicide rather than succumb to the Roman legion at their gates.

*Had something like that happened here?*

She had no answer. It was one mystery among so many others.

A shift of shadows caught the corner of her eye. She tripped to a stop and stared toward a tangle of bodies in the far corner. A hand touched her shoulder, making her jump.

Fingers tightened reassuringly. â€œWhat is it?â€ Hank asked.

â€œI thought I sawâ€â€

From the tunnel, a shout cut her off. â€œâ€™Bout time you got here!â€

A juggling light exited the far tunnel. Major Ryan appeared with a flashlight. He was in full uniform, including his helmet, which kept his eyes in shadow. His lips, though, were tight with irritation.

He beckoned with his flashlight and swung around, leading the way back into the tunnel. â€œLetâ€™s get a move on. I have the transport crate prepared as you ordered. Two of my men will assist you.â€

Hank mumbled under his breath as he followed. â€œHello to you, too, Major.â€

Maggie paused at the mouth of the tunnel and glanced back over her shoulder. Nothing moved out there now. She shook her head.

*Just a trick of light. Has me jumping at shadows.*

“We’ve had a problem,” Ryan said, drawing her attention.  
“A mishap.”  
“What sort of mishap?” Hank asked.  
“See for yourself.”  
Concerned, Maggie hurried after them.  
*What is wrong now?*  
11:40 A.M.

Hidden in shadows, the saboteur watched the three vanish into the tunnel. She let out a slow breath of relief, fighting back a tremble of fear. She’d almost been spotted when she drew her pack farther behind a pair of bodies.

Doubts plagued her in the dark.

*What am I doing here?*

She waited in the shadows, crouched as she had been since early morning. Her chosen name was Kai, which meant “willow tree” in Navajo. As her heart pounded, she sought to draw strength from her namesake, to tap into the patience of the tree, along with its legendary flexibility. She slowly stretched a kink out of her left leg. But her back continued to ache.

It wouldn’t be much longer, she promised herself.

She’d been hiding here since the crack of dawn. Two of her friends, pretending to be drunk and disorderly, had lured the guards a few yards away from the cave entrance. Using the distraction, she had ducked out of her hiding place and slipped into the tunnel behind them.

It had been a challenge to creep silently into position. But at only eighteen years of age, she was lithe, thin, and knew how to dance through shadows, a skill learned from tracking with her father since she was knee-high to him. He had taught her the old ways “before being shot while driving a cab in Boston.

The memory spiked a flare of bone-deep anger.

A year after his death, she had been recruited by WAHYA, a militant Native American rights group, who took their name from the Cherokee word for “wolf.” They were fierce, cunning, and like her, they were all young, none over thirty, all proudly intolerant of the groveling of the more established organizations.

Hidden in the dark, she let that anger stoke through her and warm away her fears. She remembered the fiery words of John Hawkes, founder and leader of WAHYA: *Why should we have to wait to be handed back our rights by the U.S. government? Why bend a knee and accept bread crumbs?*

WAHYA had already made headlines with a few small events. They’d burned an American flag on the steps of a Montana

courthouse after the conviction of a Crow Indian for using hallucinogenic mushrooms during a religious ceremony. Only last month, theyâ€™d spray-painted the offices of a Colorado congressman who sought restrictions on the stateâ€™s Indian casinos.

But events here, according to John Hawkes, offered an even greater opportunity for exposure on the national stage. Drawn by the controversy, WAHYA would come out of the shadows and take matters into its own hands, mount a firm stand against government intrusion into tribal affairs.

A shout drew her eyes toward the deeper tunnel.

She tensed. Earlierâ€™before the two new arrivals got hereâ€™a crash had echoed out of the back cavern, followed by a furious bout of cursing. Something had clearly gone wrong. She prayed that it didnâ€™t pose a problem for her mission.

Especially after waiting here so long.

Kai shifted her weight to her other leg, seeking patience, waiting for the signal. She reached out and rested one hand on the backpack full of C4 explosive, already embedded with wireless detonators.

It shouldnâ€™t be much longer.

*11:46 A.M.*

Â

â€œWhat did you do?â€ Hank asked, his voice booming across the small cavern, full of outrage.

Maggie placed a calming hand on his shoulder. She recognized the problem immediately as she stepped into the back cavern.

Along the far wall had been stacked a pile of stone boxes, all identical, each a cubic foot in size. She had examined one yesterday. It had reminded her of a small ossuary, a stone box used to hold the bones of the dead. But until she got permission from the Native American delegation of NAGPRA, none of the boxes could be opened. Each was coated in oil and wrapped in dried juniper bark.

But circumstances had changed.

She stared down at the half-dozen boxes scattered on the floor of the cave. The one closest had broken in half, still roughly held together by its bark wrapping.

Hank took a deep breath and scowled at Major Ryan. â€œThereâ€™s a strict injunction against touching any of this. Do you know how much trouble this will generate? Do you know the powder keg building up there?â€

â€œI know,â€ Ryan snapped back at him. â€œOne of these numb nuts hit the stack with the corner of the transport crate when they were swinging it around. The pile came crashing down.â€

Maggie glanced to the two National Guardsmen in the room. Both soldiers stared at their toes, accepting the rebuke. Between them



rested a plastic green trunk, hinged open, revealing a foam-lined interior, ready to secure and transport the room's singular treasure.

“So what do we do now?” Ryan asked sourly.

Maggie didn't answer. Her legs drew her to the broken stone box on the floor. She couldn't help herself. She knelt beside it.

Hank joined her. “We'd best leave it alone. We can record and document the damage, then.”

“Or we just take a peek inside.” She reached to a fractured chunk of stone, bark still stuck on it. “What's done is done.”

A warning rumble entered Hank's voice. “Maggie.”

She picked loose the bit of stone and carefully laid it aside. For the first time in ages, light shone into the box's interior.

Holding her breath, she removed another piece of stone and revealed more of what was hidden inside. The boxes appeared to contain plates of metal, blackened with age. She leaned closer and cocked her head from side to side.

*Strange. . .*

“Is that some kind of writing on it?” Hank asked, curiosity drawing him down beside her.

“Could just be streaks of corrosion.”

Maggie reached and carefully rubbed a thumb over a corner of the surface. The black oil smeared away, revealing a familiar yellowish hue beneath. She sat back.

“Gold,” Hank whispered in hushed awe.

She looked to him, then to the wall of stone boxes. She pictured similar plates packed away in the containers. Her heart pounded faster in her throat. *How much gold is here?*

Maggie stood up, trying to fathom the extent of the treasure.

“Major Ryan,” she warned, “I think you and your men will be spending a lot more time down here.”

A groan escaped him. “So there's even more gold.”

Maggie turned to the granite pillar in the center of the room. Atop it rested the massive skull of a saber-toothed tiger. All by itself, the prehistoric artifact was a valuable discovery, a spiritual totem of the slaughtered tribe—so important that the tribesmen had melted gold and coated the entire surface of the giant cat's skull.

She stepped in a slow circle around the precious idol. A trickle of fear seeped into her. Something was wrong about all of this. She couldn't put her finger on it but knew it to be true.

Unfortunately, she had no time to contemplate the mystery.

“Then at least get this skull out of here,” Ryan ordered. “We can deal with the boxes later. Do you want my men to help you?”

Hank stood up rather sharply. “We'll do it.”

Maggie nodded, and the two positioned themselves on either side of the gold totem. She held out her hands, her fingers hovering over the long golden fangs.

“I’ll grab it from the front,” she said. “You cup the back of the skull. On my count. We’ll lift it and place it into the crate.”  
“Gotcha.”

They both reached for the artifact. Maggie gripped the base of the fangs where they joined the skull. She could barely get her fingers all the way around the teeth.

“One, two . . . three.”

Together they lifted the skull. Even covered in gold, it was far heavier than she had imagined. She felt something shift inside, sliding like loose sand. Curiosity sparked through her, but any further examination would have to wait. They sidestepped in a typical workmen’s waltz over to the foam-lined open trunk and lowered the skull into the carrier. It sank heavily into the padding.

They both straightened, staring at each other. Hank rubbed his hands on his jeans and caught her eye. So he had felt it, too. Not just the shifting sands, but something even odder. As hot as it was in here, she had expected the skull to be warm. But despite the geothermal heat of the cavern, the surface had been cold.

*Damned cold.*

She read the unease in Hank’s eyes. It matched her own.

Before either could speak, Ryan slammed the lid over the treasure and pointed toward the exit. “My men will carry the skull out of the cave. From there, it’s your problem.”

12:12 P.M.

À

Crouched low, Kai watched the parade cross the field of mummies. It was led by an older woman, her hair tucked under a wide-brimmed hat. A trio of National Guard soldiers followed. Two of them hauled a green plastic trunk between them.

*The gold skull,* she thought.

They were taking it out, just as she’d been instructed they would. Everything seemed to be going according to plan. With the skull gone, she’d have the cavern to herself. She’d plant the charges, wait for nightfall, then sneak off. Once the place was empty, they’d blow the cavern and rebury their ancestors. WAHYA would make its point. Native Americans were done asking for permission from the U.S. government, especially for such basic rights as burying their dead.

She stared at the tall figure who trailed behind the others. Irritation flashed through her. She knew him, most Native Americans did. Professor Henry Kanosh was a controversial figure among the

tribes, sparking strong reactions. No one questioned that he was a staunch supporter of Indian sovereignty, and by some estimates, his labors alone had expanded reservation territory across the Western states by a full 10 percent. But like much of his ancestral band, he had taken up the Mormon faith, shedding the old ways to join a religious group that had once persecuted and slaughtered Indians in Utah. That alone made him an outcast among the more traditional members of the local Indian tribes. She had heard John Hawkes once refer to him as an "Indian Uncle Tom."

As the group reached the exit tunnel, Professor Kanosh pointed back. "Until we can get a handle on this, no one mention the gold we found in those boxes. Keep silent. We don't want to trigger a gold rush down here."

Kai's ears pricked at his words. *Gold?*

According to what she'd been told, the only gold down here was coating that prehistoric skull. WAHYA had been willing to let the totem be removed from here. The artifact was scheduled to be displayed at a Native American museum, so that was okay. Plus, if the explosion buried the golden skull with the mummified bodies, someone might be tempted to do a little digging to find it, disturbing once again the resting place of their ancestors.

*But if there's more gold down here .Â .Â . ?*

She waited until the others had climbed up into the tunnel, then stood up and shouldered her pack. She stepped gingerly through the field of bodies toward the back chamber. She had to see for herself. If there was a stockpile of gold hidden here, that changed everything. Like with the skull, such a mother lode could lure a slew of treasure hunters to come digging.

She had to know the truth.

Rushing to the far tunnel, she dashed down its dark throat as another worry struck her. With a new stash of gold down here, the guards would certainly return to protect it, complicating her plans to escape. She could be trapped down here. If she were caught, how could she explain being found with a backpack full of plastic explosive? She'd spend years, if not decades, in jail.

Fear burned brighter, hurrying her steps.

Reaching the cave, she flicked on a penlight and swept the beam around the small dark chamber. At first, she saw nothing, just old stone boxes and an empty pillar of granite. But a spark of reflected light drew her eyes down to her toes. A box had shattered on the floor.

She lowered to one knee and shoved her penlight closer. The box held what looked to be a stack of half-inch-thick metal plates. A corner had been rubbed off the top one, revealing gold beneath a layer

of tarnish. She sat back, stunned. She swept her penlight over the wall of boxes.

*What am I going to do now?*

Buried underground, she had no way to radio for help. She felt overwhelmed and trapped. This decision was hers alone. Sensing the press of time and fearing the return of the guards, she couldn't think straight. Her breathing grew harder. The darkness seemed to tighten around her.

A distant shout made her flinch. She swung toward the exit. More muffled voices followed. Someone screamed.

She sprang up.

*What is going on?*

Clutching her backpack, she sensed that WAHYA's careful plan was falling to pieces. Her heart hammered with a growing panic. Fear overtook reason. She bent down, tore open the stone box, and grabbed the top three gold plates, each about eight inches square. They were surprisingly heavy, so she tucked them into her jacket and zipped them snugly next to her body.

She needed proof for John Hawkes of why she had aborted the mission. He would not be pleased, but they might find a use for the gold, especially if there was some sort of government cover-up. She remembered Professor Kanosh's last words.

*Keep silent.*

She intended to do the same, but first she had to get out of here. She rushed headlong back to the main chamber. The angry voices outside grew louder. She had no idea what had triggered such a commotion but hoped it would help her escape. She knew she had to take the chance, or she'd be trapped down here when the soldiers returned.

That left only one hope, her best strength: her natural speed.

*If I can bolt free and reach the woods. . .*

But what stood in her way?

The booming voice of Professor Kanosh echoed down to her. "Back off!"

12:22 P.M.

^

Maggie stood only couple of yards from the cave entrance. They hadn't gotten very far before the circus found them.

Bright camera lights pointed at her, pinning them all down. A step away, she recognized the chiseled features, white hair, and ice-blue eyes of an investigative reporter from CNN. The governor of Utah accompanied him. No wonder the National Guard hadn't stopped this news crew from coming down here. Nothing like a photo op to bolster the governor's reelection campaign.

Of course, along with the news crew came the usual suspects, dancing for the national spotlight and playing for the cameras.

“You’re stealing our heritage!” came a shout from the mass of people.

She spotted the heckler, dressed in buckskin, his face painted. He had an iPhone raised and recorded the events. She expected she’d be on YouTube within the hour.

Maggie bit her tongue, knowing any response from her would only stoke the fires here.

Moments ago, as Maggie’s group stepped from the cave and was spotted, the crowd surged past the governor, who was conducting an on-air interview. Several people were knocked down. Fights broke out, and a miniriot threatened. Major Ryan rallied a cordon of Guard soldiers, instantly stemming the tide and restoring a semblance of order.

In the meantime, Hank and the other guardsmen formed a wall between her and the pack of cameras and protesters.

Hank held up a hand. “If you want to see the artifact,” he boomed out, “we’ll show you. But then Dr. Grantham will be heading straight to BYU with it, where it will be studied by historians from the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American Indians.”

Another angry shout cut him off. “So you’re going to do to this skull what they did to the body of Black Hawk!”

Maggie winced inside. It was a sore bit of Utah history. Black Hawk had been a Ute Indian leader who died during a conflict with settlers back in the mid-1800s. Afterward, his body had been put on display at various museums, then subsequently lost. It wasn’t until a Boy Scout, completing an Eagle project, found the skeleton in a storage facility at the Mormon Church’s historical department. The bones eventually were reburied.

Maggie had heard enough. Standing beside the green transport crate, she raised her arm. All eyes and camera lenses focused on her.

“We have nothing to hide!” she called out. “Clearly strong emotions surround this discovery. But let me assure everyone that all will be handled with the utmost respect.”

“Enough talking! If there’s nothing to hide, then show us the skull!”

This call was taken up by others and became a chant.

Maggie caught the gaze of the governor. He made a slight motion for her to obey. She suspected the golden totem had become a novelty for a majority of the crowd rather than an artifact of historical significance. So if this was a circus, she might as well be its ringmaster.

Turning her back, she bent down to the crate and struggled to

undo the tight latches. Her arthritic fingers made it difficult. Plus, the mist in the valley had begun to turn into a thin drizzle. Droplets pattered against the plastic top of the crate. A hush fell over the crowd.

She finally freed the latches and hauled the top open. With the rain falling, she would not expose the artifact for longer than a minute. She stared down at the gold skull nestled in its foam cocoon. Even in the wan light down here, it shone brilliantly.

She stepped back to open the view to the cameras and the crowd, but she could not take her eyes off the skull. A misty haze coalesced over its surface. She watched a drop of rain strike the golden surfaceâ€”then freeze immediately into an icy teardrop.

A collective gasp rose from the crowd behind her.

She thought theyâ€™d witnessed the event, tooâ€”then she heard a scuff of boot on rock. She glanced up to see a thin girl in black jeans and jacket come leaping out of the cave a yard away, her ebony hair fanning out like wings of a raven. She clutched an arm around her jacket, but something slipped from beneath it and hit the stone with a clanging thud.

It was one of the gold tablets.

Ryan shouted for the thief to halt.

Ignoring him, the girl turned, ready to flee toward the woods, but her foot slipped on the rain-dampened stone outside the cave. She stumbled, one arm pinwheeling for balance, sending her backpack tumbling. It rolled and came to rest near the crate. The girl came close to crashing down after it, but she gained her footing as effortlessly as a startled deer, turned on a toe, and leaped toward the edge of the forest.

Maggie remained fixed in place, crouched over the open crate to protect it. She stared down, making sure the artifact was safe. In that short time, more raindrops had fallenâ€”and frozenâ€”decorating the golden surface with beads of ice.

She reached and foolishly touched one, triggering a stinging snap. A painful jolt shot up her arm, but instead of being thrown back, she felt her arm pulled forward. Her palm struck the golden surface. With contact, the bones of her fingers suddenly ignited, burning through her flesh. Shock and horror clamped her throat shut. Her knees weakened.

She heard Hank shout at her.

Ryan bellowed, too.

One word cut through the agony.

*Bomb!*

*12:34 P.M.*

The brilliant flash blinded Hank. One moment he was shouting at Maggie, the next his vision went white. A clap of thunder tried to crush his skull, immediately deafening him. An icy shock wave knocked him back like a cold slap from God. He hit the ground on his back, then he felt a strange tug on his body, pulling him *toward* the explosion.

He fought against it, panicked down to the core. The sensation felt not only wrong, but fundamentally *unnatural*. He struggled against that tide with every fiber of his being.

Then it was over, as quickly as it had begun.

The inexorable pull popped away, releasing him. His senses snapped back. His ears filled with wails and screams. Images swirled into focus. He lay on his side, facing toward where Maggie had stood. He didnâ€™t move, too stunned.

She was goneâ€”so were the crate, the skull, and most of the cliff, including the cave entrance.

He raised up to an elbow and searched.

There was no sign of her, no charred remains, no mangled body. Nothing but a blackened circle of steaming rock.

He struggled up. Kawtch shimmied closer on his belly, cowering, tail between his leg. If Hank had a tail, heâ€™d have done the same. He placed a reassuring palm on the dogâ€™s side.

â€œItâ€™ll be okay.â€

He hoped it was true.

By now, the crowd had regained its collective footing. A panicked exodus began. The news crew retreated to higher ground, shuffled back by a cordon of National Guard. Two soldiers manhandled the governor up the trail, a precaution in case there was another attack.

Harry pictured the bag tossed by the girl. When it had landed by the crate, it had flapped open and its contents spilled out: cubes of yellowish-gray clay, embedded with wires.

Major Ryan had immediately recognized the threat.

*Bomb.*

But the warning had come too late for Maggie.

A knot of anger burned in the pit of his belly. He let it settle there as he pictured the attacker. From the girlâ€™s burnished copper skin, brown eyes, and black hair, she was definitely Native American. A homegrown terrorist. As if matters here werenâ€™t bad enough.

Numb with grief, he stumbled toward the blast zone, needing to understand. To the side, Major Ryan picked up his helmet and placed it back on his head.

â€œIâ€™ve never seen anything like this,â€ Ryan said, still dazed. â€œThe force of this explosion should have taken out half the crowd. Including us.â€ He held up an open palm. â€œAnd just feel that heat.â€

Hank did. It felt like a blast furnace. The air reeked of burning brimstone, turning his stomach.

As they watched, a large boulder crumbled apart within the blast zone, breaking down into smaller rocks. The face of the cliff began to do the same, disintegrating into a flow of boulders and sand. It was as if the hard granite had become loose sandstone, friable and weak.

“Look at the ground,” Ryan said.

Hank stared at the blasted rock, steaming and awash with a swirl of mist. The drizzling rain hissed and spattered as it struck. Still, he didn’t see what had Major Ryan so agitated. Then again, the man had much younger eyes.

Hank dropped to a knee to inspect the ground more closely. Then he saw it, too. He’d missed it through the swirl of steam. The stone surface wasn’t solid, more like a ground pepper—and it was *moving*!

The grains jittered and trembled as if they were drops of oil simmering atop a hot skillet. He watched a small pebble on the surface dissolve into coarse sand, then into a dusty powder. A drop of rain struck the ground and blasted a crater. Like a pebble hitting a still pond, ripples spread outward across the microfine surface.

Hank shook his head in disbelief. Fearful, he studied where the blast zone ended and solid ground began. As he stared, the bordering edge of stone crumbled to sand, incrementally expanding the blast zone.

“It’s spreading,” Hank realized, and pushed Ryan back.

“What are you talking about?”

Hank had no answers, only a growing certainty. “Something is still active. It’s eating away the rock and radiating outward.”

“Are you nuts? Nothing can—”

From the center of the blast zone, a belch of water burst upward from below and coughed into a steaming column, rising several yards into the air. A scalding heat chased them farther off.

By the time they stopped, Hank’s skin burned, and his eyes felt parboiled. He gasped and choked out a few words.

“Must’ve cracked into the geothermal spring . . . under the valley.”

“What are you talking about?” Ryan pulled his jacket collar over his mouth and nose. The burning sulfur made even breathing dangerous.

“Whatever’s happening here, it’s not only spreading outward—”

Hank pointed to the minigeyser.

“It’s also heading *down*.”



## Chapter 3

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*May 30, 3:39 P.M.*

*Washington, D.C.*

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*So much for dinner plans.*

Though the explosion in Utah was only an hour old, Painter Crowe knew heâ€™d be in his office all night. Details continued to flow in by the minute, but information remained sketchy due to the remote mountainous location of the blast. All of Washingtonâ€™s intelligence communities were on high alert and mobilizing to bear on the situation.

Including Sigma.

Painterâ€™s group operated as a covert wing for DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. His team was composed of handpicked Special Forces soldiersâ€”those whose IQs tested off the scales or who showed unique mental acumen. He recruited and retrained them in various scientific disciplines to act as field operatives for the Defense Departmentâ€™s research-and-development wing. Teams were sent out into the world to protect against global threats.

Normally, such a domestic attack as in Utah would not fall within his teamâ€™s purview, but a few anomalous details had drawn the interest of his boss, the head of DARPA, General Gregory Metcalf. Painter might have still argued against utilizing Sigmaâ€™s resources for such a messy business, but as a result of the controversy surrounding the blast, even the presidentâ€”who owed his life to Sigma in the pastâ€”had personally requested their assistance in this delicate matter.

*And one does not say no to President James T. Gant.*

So Painterâ€™s barbecue plans with his girlfriend were put on hold for the night.

Instead, he stood with his back to his desk and studied the large flat-panel monitors mounted on the three walls of his office. They depicted various views of the blast. The best footage came from the CNN cameras that had recorded the event. The other monitors flowed with grainy video and photos captured from cell phones, the millenniumâ€™s new digital eyes on the world.

For the hundredth time, he watched the looping feed from CNN. He saw an older womanâ€”Dr. Margaret Grantham, an anthropologistâ€”leaning over a green military transport crate. She undid the latches and lifted the lid. A commotion ensued, jittering the camera feed. The view swung wildly. He caught a glimpse of a figure behind the woman, fleeing awayâ€”then a blinding flash of light.

Using a remote control, he froze the footage. He stared into the heart of the blast. If he squinted, he could make out the shadow of the woman within that glare, a dark ghost within the blaze. He moved the image forward frame by frame and watched her shadow slowly consumed by the brightness, whittled away to nothing.

With a heavy heart, he hit the fast-forward button. From there, the footage became chaotic and jostled: trees, sky, running figures. Eventually the cameraman found a vantage point from which he felt safe enough to resume shooting. The view swung back to the steaming blast zone. Chaos still reigned as people fled the site. A handful of others remained below, cautiously examining the scene. Moments later, a steaming geyser erupted and chased even the stragglers away.

A preliminary report already sat on his desk from Sigma's resident geologist. He estimated the blast had cracked into a subsurface geothermal stream.

Painter stared again at the geyser. It wasn't *subsurface* any longer. The geologist's assessment had included a topographic map dotted with hot springs in the vicinity. Even in the dry technical jargon of the report, Painter could sense the enthusiasm brimming in the young geologist, the raw desire to investigate the site firsthand.

While he appreciated such passion, the National Guard had the place locked down. A search was under way for the shadowy figure behind the blast. Using the remote control again, he froze the fleeting image of the bomber, blurry and indistinct, caught for less than a second.

According to interviews, it was a young woman. She had tossed a backpack full of C4, wired with detonators, then fled into the woods. The National Guard, local police forces, and agents from Salt Lake City's FBI field office were attempting to seal off the area, but the mountainous terrain, rugged and thickly wooded, posed a challenge to finding her, especially if she knew the area.

To make matters worse, eyewitnesses reported that the woman was Native American. If true, that would mean even more political tension.

Painter caught his reflection in the monitor and searched for his own ancestry. He was a half-blooded Pequot Indian, on his father's side, but his blue eyes and light skin came from his Italian mother. Most never pegged him as Native American, but the features were there, if you looked hard enough: the wide, high cheekbones, the deep black hair. But as he aged, those Indian traits shone more strongly.

Lisa had commented on it only last month. They had been spending a lazy Sunday in bed, reading the paper, finding no reason to get up. She had leaned on an elbow and traced a finger down his face. "You're keeping your tan longer, and these sun crinkles are

deepening. Youâ€™re getting to look a lot like that old photo of your father.â€

*Not exactly something you wanted to hear when lounging in bed with your girlfriend.*

She had reached and fingered the single lock of white hair behind his ear, tucked like a snowy feather against the field of black. â€œOr maybe itâ€™s just that youâ€™re letting your hair grow out. I could almost tie this into a warriorâ€™s braid.â€

In fact, he hadnâ€™t been growing his hair out. He just hadnâ€™t had a chance to get it cut for a couple of months. Heâ€™d been spending more and more time at Sigma Command. The covert facility lay buried beneath the Smithsonian Castle on the National Mall, occupying what had once been bomb shelters during World War II. The location had been picked for both its convenient access to the halls of power and for its proximity to the Smithsonian Institutionâ€™s many research facilities.

It was where Painter spent most of his days. His only windows on the world of late were his officeâ€™s three giant monitors.

He turned away and crossed back to his desk, contemplating the implication of a homegrown terrorist, one with a Native American background. He seldom gave his own heritage much thought, especially after spending most of his youth in a series of foster homes. His mother, suffering from depression, had stabbed his father to death after seven years of marriage and the birth of their son. Afterward, Painter continued to have some contact with his Native American roots, fostered through the extended family of his fatherâ€™s tribe. But after such a hardscrabble and chaotic upbringing, heâ€™d grown to place more emphasis on the *American* part of his Native American ancestry.

A knock on his open office door interrupted him. He glanced up to see Ronald Chin, Sigmaâ€™s geology expert, standing in the doorway. â€œThought you should see this.â€

Painter waved the geologist inside, almost expecting him to have to duck through the doorway. Chin stood just shy of six feet, missing that mark only because he kept his head shaved to the skin. He wore a gray lab jumpsuit, zippered half down to reveal an Army Ranger T-shirt.

â€œWhat is it?â€ Painter asked.

â€œI was poring through some of the reports and came across something that could be important.â€ He placed a file atop the desk. â€œIt was from a debriefing of a National Guardsman on the scene, a Major Ashley Ryan. Most of the questions centered on the identity of the bomber, along with events leading up to the blast. But Major Ryan seemed mighty agitated about the blast itself.â€

Painter sat up straighter and reached to the file.

“If you look at page eighteen, I’ve highlighted the key passages.”

Painter opened the report, flipped pages, and read what was marked in yellow. There were only a handful of exchanges, but the major’s last statement sent a chill through his blood.

He read it aloud. *“The ground . . . it looked like it was dissolving away.”*

Chin stood with hands behind his back on the far side of his desk. “From the beginning, I thought there was something odd about that blast. So I consulted Sigma’s demolition expert. He came to the same conclusion. For a detonation strong enough to break through bedrock and crack open a geothermal spring, the concussive blast radius should have been tenfold larger.”

A gruff voice interrupted from the doorway. “That’s right. Not nearly enough bang.”

Painter turned to the doorway again. Apparently Sigma’s new resident bomb expert had come to support Chin’s assessment. The man leaned against the door frame. He stood half a foot taller than Chin, and outweighed his teammate by a good forty pounds, most of it muscle. His dark hair was stubble, but he still slicked back what little was there with gel. The man wore the same coveralls as Chin, but from the bared chest, it looked like he was wearing nothing underneath.

In his right hand, he kneaded a fistful of clay.

Painter grew concerned. “Kowalski, is that the C4 from the weapons locker?”

The man straightened with a shrug, suddenly looking sheepish. “Thought I’d run a test . . .”

Painter felt a sick lurch in his stomach. Joe Kowalski was ex-Navy, hired by Sigma a few years ago. Unlike others, he was more of an adoptee than a recruit. He had been serving as muscle and team support, but Painter sensed there might be more to this guy than met the eye, a vein of sharpness hidden beneath that dull exterior.

At least he hoped so.

Painter had reviewed the man’s dossier since he’d joined Sigma—evaluating his aptitude and skills—and eventually assigned him to a field of study for which he seemed best suited: blowing stuff up.

Painter was beginning to regret that decision. “I don’t think any explosives tests will be necessary.” He tapped the file on his desk. “Have you read this field report?”

“I skimmed it.”

“What’s your take?”

“Definitely wasn’t C4.” He lifted his fist of explosive and gave it a squeeze. “The explosion was something else.”

“Any thoughts?”

“Not without examining the blast field. Collecting some samples. Otherwise I have no clue.”

He had to give Kowalski credit. It was a passable evaluation.

“Well, someone knows the truth.” Painter leaned back in his desk chair and glanced to the screen with the frozen image of the bomber. “That is, if we can find her.”

2:22 P.M.

*Utah Wilderness*

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Kai hid in a dense thicket of mountain willows alongside a cold stream. She knelt, cupped the clear water, and drank. She ignored the nagging concerns of giardia or other intestinal parasites. Most of the flow here was fresh snowmelt. As thirsty as she was, she’d take her chances.

After drinking enough to wet her mouth and take the edge off her thirst, she covered her face with icy-wet palms. The cold helped her focus.

Still, even with closed eyes, she could not get the image out of her head. As she had fled the burial cave, she had glanced back in time to see the flash of brilliance, hear the thunderclap. Screams and cries chased her into the deeper woods.

*Why did I drop my pack?*

John Hawkes had sworn the C4 was safe. He’d said she could fire a bullet into one of the explosive charges, and nothing would happen. So what went wrong? Already scared, she came up with one frightening possibility. Had someone with WAHYA witnessed her flight out of the cave and telephoned in the detonation command?

But why would they do that, knowing people were around?

No one was supposed to get hurt.

She hadn’t had any time to think. For the past two hours, she’d been running headlong through the woods, as fleet-footed as any deer. She kept hidden from the air as much as possible. She’d already spotted one helicopter as it skimmed past a ridgeline. It looked like a news chopper rather than law enforcement, but it still sent her diving for the thicket.

During the remaining hours of daylight, she had to put as much distance as possible between herself and any pursuers. She knew they’d be looking for her. She pictured her face being broadcast across the nation. She was under no illusion that her identity would remain a secret for long.

*All those cameras .^ .^ . someone surely got a good picture of me.*

It was only a matter of time before she was caught.

She needed help.

But whom could she trust?

4:35 P.M.

Washington, D.C.

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â€œDirector, it looks like we finally caught a break.â€

â€œShow me,â€ Painter said as he stepped into the darkened room, lit only by a circular bank of monitors and glowing computer screens.

Sigmaâ€™s satellite com always reminded him of the control room on a nuclear submarine, where the ambient light was kept low to preserve night vision. And like a subâ€™s control room, this was the nerve center of Sigma Command. All information flowed into and out of this interconnected web of feeds from various intelligence agencies, both domestic and foreign.

The spider of this particular web stood before a bank of monitors and waved Painter over. Captain Kathryn Bryant was Sigmaâ€™s chief intelligence expert and had grown to become Painterâ€™s second-in-command at Sigma. She was his eyes and ears throughout Washington and a savvy player in the internecine world of D.C. politics. And like any good spider, she maintained a meticulous web, casting strands far and wide. But her best asset was an uncanny ability to monitor each vibrating filament of her web, filter out the static, and produce results.

Like now.

Kat had called him down here with the promise of a breakthrough.

â€œGive me a second to bring up the feed from Salt Lake City,â€ she said.

She winced slightly, placed a palm on her belly, and continued to type one-handed on a keyboard. At eight months along, she was huge, but she refused to leave early for maternity leave. Her only concession to her condition was that sheâ€™d abandoned her usual tight dress blues for a casual loose dress and jacket, and allowed the curls of her auburn hair to drape past her shoulders, rather than pinning them up.

â€œWhy donâ€™t you at least sit down?â€ he said, and pulled out the chair in front of the monitor.

â€œIâ€™ve been sitting all day. Babyâ€™s been doing a tap dance on my bladder since lunch.â€ She waved him closer. â€œDirector, you need to see this. From the start of the investigation, Iâ€™ve been monitoring the local news programs over in Salt Lake City. It wasnâ€™t difficult to hack into their computer servers and look over their shoulders as they readied their evening news broadcasts.â€

â€œWhy?â€

â€œBecause I figured itâ€™s damn easy to hide a cell phone.â€

He glanced quizzically at her.

She explained. "From the number of people who witnessed the attack, the odds were good that someone got a picture or video of the bomber. So why no footage?"

"Maybe everyone was too panicked."

"Perhaps *after* the bomb, but not before. If you start with the proposition that a photo *was* taken, why wasn't it turned in to the police? I followed that line of reasoning. Greed is a strong motivator."

"You think someone hid footage of the bomber to make a few bucks."

"To be thorough, I had to assume that. It would be easy enough to hide a phone during the chaos. Or even e-mail the footage and erase the record. So I canvassed the broadcast logs for tonight's local news in Salt Lake City and came across a file at an NBC affiliate labeled 'New Footage from the Utah Bombing.'"

Kat hit a button on the keyboard, and a video started playing, another view of the same scenario he'd watched over and over. Only this time, the bomber was caught in full view, exiting the cave, still carrying the backpack. She was moving fast, but for a fraction of a second, she stared fully at the camera.

Kat deftly captured the image and froze it. The image was grainy, but she certainly looked Native American, as the eyewitnesses had reported.

Painter leaned closer. His heart began pounding harder. "Can you zoom in?"

"The resolution's poor. I'll need a minute to clean it up." Kat's fingers flew over the keyboard. "I thought we should be ahead of the curve on this. The broadcast is slated for the top of the six o'clock hour in Salt Lake City. I happened to read a draft of the accompanying copy. It's very inflammatory. Coloring the attack as a possible resurgence of Native American militancy. In the same broadcast folder, they posted archival footage of Wounded Knee."

Painter bit back a groan. Back in 1973, members of the American Indian movement waged a bloody siege with the FBI in Wounded Knee, South Dakota. Two people were killed and many others injured in the firefight that ensued. It took decades for the tension between the tribes and the government to subside.

"Okay," Kat said. "Program's done rendering the sample."

The image reappeared, a thousand times crisper. Kat manipulated the computer mouse to fill the screen with the girl's face. The detail was amazing. Her dark eyes were wide with fear, her lips parted in a panicked breath, her ebony hair billowing out and framing

distinctly Native American features.

“She’s certainly a looker,” Kat said. “Somebody must know her. It won’t take long to put a name to that pretty face.”

Painter barely heard the words. He stared at the screen. His vision narrowed, fixed upon that frozen image on the screen.

Kat must have sensed something wrong and turned to face him. “Director Crowe?”

Before he could respond, his cell phone rang. He pulled it out. It was his personal BlackBerry, unencrypted.

*Must be Lisa checking about the barbecue party.*

He put the phone to his ear, needing to hear her voice.

But it wasn’t Lisa. The caller’s words came rushed, breathless. “Uncle Crowe . . . I need your help.”

Shock choked him.

“I’m in trouble. So much trouble. I don’t know”

The words suddenly died. In the background, he heard the growl of a large animal, followed by a sharp, terrified scream.

Painter gripped the phone harder. “Kai!”

The line cut off.



## Chapter 4

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*May 30, 2:50 P.M.*

*Utah Wilderness*

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Kai backed away from the dog.

Covered in mud, soaked to the skin, it looked feral, maybe even rabid. Lips rippled back in a menacing growl, baring all its teeth. It stalked toward her, head low, tail high, ready to pounce at her throat.

A shout behind her made her jump. "That's enough, Kawtch! Back down!"

She turned as a tall man in a Stetson rode through a thick stand of lodgepole pines atop a chestnut quarter horse. The mare moved with an easy grace, stepping nearly silently up the slope.

Kai pressed her back against a tree, ready to flee. She was sure it was a federal marshal, swore she even spotted a badge, but once he got closer, she saw it was only a compass hanging around his neck. He tucked it back under his shirt.

"You gave us quite the chase, young lady," the man said harshly, his face still shadowed by his wide-brimmed hat. "But there's no trail Kawtch can't follow once he's got his nose to it."

The dog wagged its tail, but its sharp eyes remained locked on her. A low growl rumbled.

The stranger slid out of his saddle and dropped easily to the ground. He patted the dog to calm it as he joined her. "You'll have to excuse Kawtch. He's still spooked by that explosion. Got him all on edge."

Kai didn't know what to make of the man's attitude. He was plainly not with the National Guard or the state police. Was he a bounty hunter? She eyed the pistol holstered on his right hip. Was that meant for her or merely a wise precaution against the black bears and bobcats that roamed the forests up here?

The stranger finally stepped out of the shadows, took off his Stetson, and wiped his brow with a handkerchief. She recognized his salt-and-pepper hair tied in a ponytail, the unmistakable hard planes of his Native American features. Shock made her momentarily dizzy. She had seen this same man in the mountain cavern only a couple of hours ago.

"Professor Kanosh. " His name tumbled from her lips, her voice half angry, half relieved.

One eyebrow cocked in surprise. It took him a moment to speak. He held out his hand. "I suppose, under the circumstances, Hank will do."

She refused to take his hand. She still remembered John Hawkes's description of the man. *An Indian Uncle Tom*. Of course, this traitor to his people would be working for the government to help track her down.

His arm dropped. He planted his hands on his hips, fingers brushing the top of his holstered pistol. "So what're we going to do with you, young lady? You've got yourself into a mountain of trouble. All the law on this side of the Rockies is out looking for you. That explosion back there?"

She had heard enough. "It wasn't my fault!" she blurted out, loud and angry, needing to lash out against someone. "I don't know what happened!"

"That may be so, but someone died during that blast. A dear friend of mine. And people are looking for someone to blame."

She stared at him. She read the well of sadness in the deep wrinkles at the corner of his eyes. He was telling the truth.

With his words, the anger inside her blew out like a doused candle. Her worst fears were now real. She covered her face, remembering the blast, the blinding flash. She slumped down the trunk of the tree and crouched into a ball. She had murdered someone.

The well of tears that had been building inside her chest since the explosion broke through the tight terror. Silent sobs rocked through her.

"No one was supposed to get hurt," she choked out, but her words sounded meaningless even to her.

A shadow fell over her. The old man knelt down, put an arm around her shoulders, and pulled her into his side. She didn't have the strength to fight it.

"I can only imagine what you intended with that backpack full of explosives," he said softly. "But you were right before. That explosion wasn't your fault."

She resisted the comfort of his words. Before her father died, he taught her right from wrong, instilled in her the importance of responsibility. It had just been the two of them most of her life. He took two jobs to keep food on the table and a roof over their heads. She spent more nights babysitting neighbors' kids than in their own apartment. They took care of each other as well as they could.

So she could not fool herself. Whether it was by accident or not, her actions had ended up killing someone today.

"I don't know what happened back there," Kanosh continued, his voice warm and full of reassurance, "but it wasn't your explosives that blew up the mountain inside. I think it was that totem skull. Or something *inside* that skull."

A part of her heard his words and latched onto them like someone

drowning. Still, lost in guilt and grief, she feared fully accepting what he was saying.

Perhaps sensing her resistance, he spoke quietly. "I read the reports before coming here, about the rumors concerning the cave, ancient stories shared by a handful of tribal elders. According to those stories, the burial cave was cursed, and any trespass would end in ruin for all." He let out a soft and sad snort. "Maybe someone should have listened. As much as I've studied our people's past, I've learned how often such stories have a hard kernel of truth inside of them."

The strength of his arms and the assurance of his words helped calm her. Tears continued to flow, but she found the strength to lift her head, needing to see his face as much as hear his words.

"So . . . so the explosion wasn't the C4 I had in my pack?"

"No. It was something much worse. It's why I came looking for you. To protect you."

She pulled straighter, out of his arms. He must have read her questioning look.

"That explosion helped set off the powder keg already brewing on the top of the mountain. When I slipped away, the activists gathered on the mountaintop were already beginning to skirmish with the National Guard. Everyone is accusing the other side of all manner of crimes and atrocities. But they're all certain about one thing."

She swallowed, guessing what that was. "They think I'm to blame."

"And they're all looking for you. And as much tension and confusion as is out there, I fear they may shoot first and ask questions later."

She shivered, suddenly cold. "What am I going to do?"

"First, you're going to tell me what happened. Everything. Every detail. The truth is often one's best shield."

She didn't know where to begin, wasn't sure she even knew the whole truth. But the old man's hand found hers and squeezed reassurance. She took strength from the iron in those strong fingers, so much like her father's callused hands.

Still, her words came reluctantly at first, but before long, her story came out in a rush, both as a confession and as an act of contrition. But deep down, she also knew she needed to unload her burden onto someone else's shoulders and share it.

3:08 P.M.

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Hank watched the girl as much as he listened to her accounting of events. He kept his questions to a minimum, discovering more truth in

the telling than in the facts. He saw the raw fear dim to embers in her eyes. As she told her story, he recognized her deep-seated sense of betrayal after the death of her father, needing to blame someone, to make sense of a senseless murder. Lost and scared, she found a new home, a new tribe with her militant fellow members of WAHYA.

It was a story heâ€™d heard all too often among Native American youth: broken families, poverty, domestic abuse, alcoholism. All of it compounded and concentrated by the isolation of reservation life. It left young men and women lost and angry, looking to lash out. Many fell into lives of crime, others into profound hatred for anyone in authority. It was men like John Hawkes, the founder of WAHYA, who preyed upon those lost souls, who twisted that teenage angst to serve their own ends.

It was a path Hank knew all too well. In his teen years, he had begun selling drugs, first in school, then more broadly. He settled in with a hard crowd. It was only after one of his best friends had been killed by a strung-out junkie that he found his way back to his faith, back to the Mormon Church of his tribe. To many, it was a strange path to salvation for an Indian. He knew the disdain other Native Americans had for those tribesmen who joined the Mormon faith. But since finding his way back home, he had never been more content.

And since then, he refused to give up on anyone lost who fell across his path. It was one of the reasons he fought so hard to protect tribal rights, not so much for the tribes themselves, but to support and enrich the reservations, to build a better foundation for the youngest among them.

His own grandfatherâ€™s long in his graveâ€™had once told him: *The richest harvest comes from best-tilled soil.* It was a philosophy he attempted to live by every day.

As the girl finished her story, she unzipped her jacket, drawing back his full attention. She pulled out two paperback-sized plates of metal.

â€œThis is why I left without setting the charges. I took these. As proof for John Hawkes. To show him there was more gold than just that cat skull.â€

Hankâ€™s eyes grew wide. She had stolen two of the gold plates. He had thought they were all lost, buried under half a mountain.

â€œMay I see those?â€

She offered one to him, and he examined it under a patch of sunlight. Through the black grime, he could make out lines of strange script etched into the gold. This was the sole surviving clue to the mystery of that cavern, of the mass suicide, of what was hidden so that blood had to be spilled to protect it.

But in truth, his interest went beyond the academic. His hands

trembled slightly as he held the plates. While he was Native American, he was also Mormon—and as a scholar of history, he had studied his religion's past as thoroughly as his Native American heritage. According to his faith, the Book of Mormon came from translations of a lost language inscribed on gold plates discovered by Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Latter Day Saints. Ever since that revelation, rumors of other caches of plates had been reported periodically across the Americas. Most of these discoveries were ruled out as hoaxes or frauds; others could never be found or substantiated.

He stared at the blurry writing, aching with both heart and head to study what was written there—but he had a more immediate concern.

The girl voiced it aloud. “What are we going to do?”

He passed the plate back to her and motioned for her to zip them both into her jacket again. He held out his arm once more, starting over. “Hank Kanosh.”

She took his hand this time. “Kai. . . Kai Quocheets.”

He frowned at her name. “If I’m not mistaken, Kai means ‘willow tree’ in Navajo. But from your accent and look, you strike me as someone from a Northeastern tribe.”

She nodded. “I’m Pequot Indian. My mother named me. She was a quarter Navajo, and according to my father, she wanted me to carry a bit of her heritage.”

Hank pointed down the mountainside. “Then let’s see how well you live up to your name, young lady. The willow is known for its resiliency in the face of strong winds. And a storm is certainly brewing around you.”

This earned him the shyest of grins.

Hank headed over to his horse. Though twenty years old, the mare was as sure-footed as any steed. He mounted up with a slight complaint from his hip.

He waved for Kawtch to lead the way. With the mountains being combed by armed hunters, he didn’t want any more surprises. Kawtch would alert him if anyone came too close.

Turning in the saddle, he offered an arm to Kai. She eyed the mare with suspicion. “You’ve never ridden before?” he asked.

“I grew up in Boston.”

“Okay then, grab my arm. I’ll pull you up behind me. Mariah won’t let you fall.”

The girl took hold of his wrist. “Where are we going?”

“To turn you in.”

Her smile vanished. The ember of fear flared brighter in her eyes. Before she could protest, he yanked her up, earning a sharp twinge from his shoulder.

“I’m sorry, but you’ll have to face what you did.”

She climbed into the saddle behind him. “But I didn’t cause the explosion.”

He twisted to face her. “True. But, aborted or not, you were still about to commit an act of violence. There will be consequences. But don’t worry. I’ll be at your side . . . along with a slew of Native American lawyers.”

His words failed to dim the fear shining in her eyes.

There was nothing he could do about that. The sooner he got the child under custody, the safer she would be. As if it had heard his thought, the bell beat of a helicopter thundered out of nowhere. As he scanned the skies, a pair of scared arms circled his stomach. He never had a child himself, but the simple gesture warmed through him, igniting a paternal need to protect this frightened girl.

Off to the north, a small military chopper crested out of the neighboring valley and flew slowly over this one, dipping lower as it cleared the ridge, plainly searching. It looked like an angry and persistent hornet. Even without the military green of the craft, Hank recognized it as one of the Utah National Guard helicopters, even knew it was an Apache Longbow.

He took the name of the chopper as a good omen, not that either of them were Apache. He nudged his horse toward the edge of the pine forest, toward an open meadow.

*Might as well get this over with.*

Those arms tightened around him.

“Just stay low,” he told her. “Let me do all the talking.”

He kept Mariah to a slow walk, her flanks rolling as they headed toward the sunny spread of grass. He didn’t want anyone being surprised. Even before they reached the edge of the dense forest, the chopper banked abruptly and swung toward them.

*Must have infrared aboard. Picked up our body heat.*

He walked the mare out of the forest and into the open glade.

The helicopter dove toward them, nose dipping, blades cutting the air with a deafening chop. The noise was so loud, he could only stare as twin rows of grass and soil blasted upward, silently chewing across the meadow toward their position.

At last, he heard the rattle of the chopper’s chain guns.

*What the hell . . . ?*

Shock and disbelief froze him for a breath.

They were being fired at.

With a yank of the reins, he swung Mariah around.

A shout burst from his lips. “Hold tight!”

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*May 30, 5:14 P.M.*

*Washington, D.C.*

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“Still no luck tracing your niece’s cell,” Kat announced as she stepped into Painter’s office. “But we’ll keep trying.”

He stood behind his desk, checking the contents of his packed briefcase. The jet was set to take off from Reagan National in thirty minutes. It would get him to Salt Lake City in four hours.

He studied Kat’s face. A single crease across her forehead expressed her worry. He shared it.

It had been over half an hour since his niece’s frantic call had suddenly cut off. He’d been unable to raise her again. Had she dropped out of cell reception? Had she turned off her phone? Kat had attempted to track the cell’s trace but clearly was having no better luck.

“And there’s still no word of her being captured out in Utah?” he asked.

Kat shook her head. “The sooner you get out there, the better. If there’s any news, I’ll call you midflight. Kowalski and Chin are already waiting topside for you.”

He snapped closed his briefcase. Before the desperate call, he had planned on putting a team out in the field in Utah. He wanted someone from Sigma on hand to determine the true nature of that strange explosion. Ronald Chin, the team’s resident geology expert, was the perfect choice—and Kowalski could certainly use some field time as a member of an investigative team.

But with that one phone call, matters had become personal.

He picked up his briefcase and headed toward the door. For the moment they were keeping knowledge of his niece to as few people as possible, maintaining a need-to-know basis. Kai already had a large enough target on her back.

As an extra precaution, Painter purposely neglected to inform his boss, General Metcalf, the head of DARPA. That slight was done to avoid a lengthy explanation as to *why* Painter was heading out into the field. Metcalf operated strictly by the book, an inflexible posture that continually tied Painter’s hands. And considering the personal nature of his trip, Painter figured it was easier to ask for forgiveness from his boss than to get permission.

Plus he and Metcalf had not been on the best of terms of late, mostly due to a private investigation Painter had started six months ago, an investigation into a shadowy organization that had plagued Sigma since its inception. Only five people in the world knew about

this secret research project. But Metcalf was no fool. He was beginning to suspect something was up and had begun to ask questions that Painter would prefer not to answer.

So maybe it was best to get out of D.C. for a while anyway.

Kat followed Painter out into the hallway.

As they exited his office, a man stood up from a seat in the hall. Painter was surprised to see Kat's husband, Monk Kokkalis.

Given his craggy features, shaved head, and boxer's build, few suspected the sharp intelligence hidden behind that brutish exterior. Monk was a former Green Beret, but he'd been retrained by Sigma in the field of forensic medicine, with a secondary specialty in biotechnology. The latter came from personal experience. Monk had lost his one of his hands during a prior mission. It had been replaced by a wonder of prosthetic sciences, employing the latest in DARPA technologies. Outfitted with all manner of countermeasures, it was half hand, half weapons system.

"Monk, what are you doing here? I thought you were running shakedown tests on that new prosthesis of yours."

"All finished. Passed with flying colors." He lifted his arm and flexed his fingers as proof. "Then Kat called. Thought you might need an extra pair of hands in the field. Or at least a hand and one kick-ass new prosthetic."

Painter glanced to Kat.

She kept her face fixed. "I thought you could use someone with more field experience joining you on this trip."

Painter appreciated her offer, especially because he knew how much Kat hated Monk being away from her side, especially now that she was about to give birth to their second child. But in this case, Painter refused for a more practical reason.

"Thanks, but with the escalating tension out on that mountain, I think a smaller, more surgical team might be best."

As he watched the crease in Kat's forehead relax, he knew he'd made the right call. While he was gone, he fully trusted Kat to fill in as the temporary director of Sigma—and he knew that with Monk nearby, she would remain focused. Her husband was both her anchor and the very water that kept her afloat. Monk slipped his arm around his wife's waist, resting his palm on her full belly. She leaned into him.

With the matter settled, he headed down the hall.

"Be careful out there, Director," Monk called to him.

Painter heard the longing in the man's voice. It seemed the offer to accompany him might not have solely originated from Kat. Likewise, Painter's decision to leave Monk behind was not entirely for Kat's benefit. While the man was certainly *her* anchor, he



served that same role for one other, a teammate who was having a very tough few months.

And Painter suspected it would get worse.

5:22 P.M.

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Commander Grayson Pierce did not know what to do with his mother. She paced the length of the medical exam room.

â€œI donâ€™t understand why I couldnâ€™t be there when the neurologist questions your father,â€ she said, angry, frustrated.

â€œYou know why,â€ he replied calmly. â€œThe social worker explained. The mental acuity tests theyâ€™re running on Dad are more accurate if family members arenâ€™t present.â€

She waved away his words as she turned and headed back across the room. He noticed her stumble, her left leg almost giving out. He shifted forward in his seat, ready to catch her, but she recovered her balance.

Leaning back into the plastic chair, Gray studied his mother. She had lost weight over the past couple of months, worn down by worry. The silk blouse hung from her thin shoulders, sagging enough to reveal one bra strap, a lack of modesty she normally would never have tolerated. Only her gray hair, done up and pinned back, remained perfect. Gray pictured her fussing over it, imagining it was the one bit of her life still under her control.

As she paced away her worry, Gray listened to the muffled exchanges going on in the exam room. He couldnâ€™t hear any words, but he recognized the sharper notes of his fatherâ€™s irritation. He feared an explosion from him at any moment and remained tense, ready to burst into the next room if needed. His father, a former Texas oil rigger, was never a calm man, prone to outbursts and sudden violence during Grayâ€™s childhood, a temper exacerbated by an early disability that left the proud man with only one good leg. But now he was even more short-fused as advancing Alzheimerâ€™s eroded away his self-control along with his memory.

â€œI should be with him,â€ his mother repeated.

Gray didnâ€™t argue. Heâ€™d already had countless conversations about this with them both, trying to encourage moving his father into an assisted-living facility with a memory unit. But such attempts were met with stonewalling, anger, and suspicion. The two refused to leave the Takoma Park bungalow that theyâ€™d lived in for decades, preferring the illusory comfort of the familiar to the support of a facility.

But Gray didnâ€™t know how long that could be sustained.

Not just for his fatherâ€™s sake but also his motherâ€™s.

She stumbled again on a turn. He caught her elbow. â€œWhy donâ€™t

“Can you sit down?” he said. “You’re exhausting yourself, and they should almost be done.”

He felt the frail bird bones of her arm as he guided her to a seat. He’d already had a private talk with the social worker. She had expressed concern about his mother’s health—both physical and mental—warning that it was common for a caregiver to succumb to stress and die before the actual patient.

Gray didn’t know what else to do. He had already employed a full-time nursing aide to help his mother during the day, an intrusion that was met with more resentment than acceptance. But even that was not enough any longer. There were growing issues with medications, with proper safety in his parents’ older house, even with meal planning and preparation. At night, any phone call set his heart to pounding, as he suspected the worst.

He had offered to move into the house with them, to be there at night, but so far that was a Rubicon his mother refused to cross—though Gray believed her refusal was motivated less by pride than by a feeling of guilt about imposing upon her son in such a manner. And with all the rough water under the bridge between father and son, maybe it was for the best. So for now, it remained a private slow dance between husband and wife.

The exam room door opened, drawing back his attention. He sat straighter as the neurologist entered the room. From the doctor’s stern expression, Gray anticipated that the assessment was grim. Over the next twenty minutes, Gray learned how grim. His father was sliding from the moderate stages of Alzheimer’s toward more severe symptoms. From here, they could expect to see trouble with his ability to get dressed on his own, to use the toilet. There would be more issues with him wandering and getting lost. The social worker suggested alarming the doors.

As this was discussed, Gray watched his father sitting in the corner with his mother. He looked a frail shadow of the domineering man he once was. He sat sullenly, scowling at the doctor’s every word. Every now and then a breathless “bullshit” escaped his lips, spoken so quietly only Gray heard him.

But Gray also noted his father’s hand clutching tightly to his mother’s. They held to each other, weathering as best they could the doctor’s prognosis, as if by force of will alone they could resist the inevitable decline and ensure that neither would ever lose the other.

Finally, with a rush of insurance paperwork and prescription revisions, they were set free. Gray drove his parents back home, made sure they had dinner for the night, and returned to his own apartment by bicycle. He pressed himself hard, pedaling quickly through the

streets, using the exertion to clear his head.

Reaching his apartment, he took a long shower, long enough to use up all the hot water. Shivering as the water turned cold, he toweled off, slipped into a pair of boxers, and headed into the kitchen. He was halfway toward the refrigerator and the lone bottle of Heineken left from the six-pack he'd bought yesterday when he noted the figure sitting on his La-Z-Boy recliner.

He spun around. Normally he wasn't so unobservant. It wasn't a good survival trait for a Sigma operative. Then again, the woman, dressed all in black leather and steel zippers, sat as still as a statue. A motorcycle helmet rested on the arm of the chair.

Gray recognized her, but it did not slow his spiked heartbeat. The small hairs along his arms refused to go down. And with good reason. It was like suddenly discovering a she-panther lounging in your living room.

"Seichan. A. A." he said.

Her only greeting was an uncrossing of her legs, but even this small movement suggested the power and grace stored within her whip-thin body. Jade-green eyes stared at him, taking measure of him, her face unreadable. In the shadows, her Eurasian features looked carved out of pale marble. The only softness about her was the loose flow of her hair, longer now, below her collar, not her usual severe bob. The left corner of her lips turned slightly up, amused by his surprise—or was it just a trick of those shadows?

He didn't bother asking how she'd gotten into his locked apartment or why she presented herself in such an abrupt and unannounced manner. She was a skilled assassin, formerly employed by an international criminal organization called the Guild—but even that name wasn't real, only a useful pseudonym to use in task-force reports and intelligence briefings. Its real identity and purpose remained unknown, even to its own operatives. The organization operated through individual cells around the world, each running independently, none having the complete picture.

After betraying her former employers, Seichan was left with no home, no country. Intelligence agencies—including those in the United States—had her on their most-wanted lists. The Mossad maintained a kill-on-sight order. But as of a year ago, she now worked for Sigma, recruited unofficially by Director Crowe for a mission too secret to be on any books: to root out the identities of the true puppet masters of the Guild.

But no one was fooled by her cooperation. It was driven by survival, not by loyalty to Sigma. She had to destroy the Guild before it destroyed her. Only a handful of people in the government knew of the special arrangement with this assassin. To help maintain that level

of secrecy, Gray had been assigned as her direct supervisor and sole contact within Sigma.

Still, it had been five weeks since sheâ€™d last reported in. And then it had only been by phone. Sheâ€™d been somewhere in France. So far, all sheâ€™d been hitting was dead ends.

*So what is she doing here now?*

She answered his silent question. â€œWe have a problem.â€

Gray did not take his eyes off her. While he should be concerned, he could not discount a spark of relief. He pictured the beer bottle in the fridge, remembering why he had needed it. He was suddenly glad for the distraction, something that didnâ€™t involve social workers, neurologists, or prescriptions.

â€œThis problem of yours,â€ he asked, â€œdoes it have anything to do with the situation in Utah?â€

â€œWhat situation in Utah?â€ she asked, her eyes narrowing.

He studied her, searching her face for any sign of deception. The bombing had certainly stirred up Sigma, and Seichanâ€™s sudden appearance struck Gray as suspicious.

She finally shrugged. â€œI came to show you this.â€

She stood up, passed him a sheaf of papers, and headed toward the door. Clearly he was meant to follow. He stared down at the symbol on the top page, but it made no sense to him.

He glanced up to her as she reached the door.

â€œSomethingâ€™s stirred up a hornetâ€™s nest,â€ she said. â€œRight here in your own backyard. Something big. It may be the break weâ€™ve been waiting for.â€

â€œHow so?â€

â€œTwelve days ago, every feeler Iâ€™ve been extending around the globe suddenly jangled. A veritable earthquake. In its wake, every contact Iâ€™ve been grooming went dead silent.â€

*Twelve days ago. . . .*

Gray realized that this time frame coincided with the day the Native American boy had been killed out in Utah. Could there be a connection?

Seichan continued: â€œSomething big has piqued the Guildâ€™s interest. And that earthquake I mentioned . . . its epicenter is here in D.C.â€ She faced him from the door. â€œEven now, I can sense unseen forces mobilizing into position. And itâ€™s during such chaos that sealed doors get cracked open, just long enough for bits of intel to blow out.â€

Gray noted her eyes sparking, her breathing sharpening with excitement. â€œYou found something.â€

She pointed again at the papers in his hand. â€œIt starts there.â€

He stared again at the symbol on the top page.



WILLIAM MORROW

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It was the Great Seal of the United States.

He didn't understand. He flipped over the next pages. They were a mix of typed research notes, sketches, and photocopies of an old handwritten letter. Though the letter's ink was faded, the cursive script was precise, written in French. He read the name to which the letter was addressed, *Archard Fortescue*. Definitely sounded French. But it was the signature at the end, the signature of the man who wrote the letter, that truly caught Gray's attention, a name known to every schoolchild in America.

*Benjamin Franklin.*

He frowned at the name, then at Seichan. "What do these papers have to do with the Guild?"

"You and Crowe told me to find the true source of those bastards." Seichan turned and pulled open the door. He noted a flicker of fear pass over her features before she looked away. "You're not going to like what I found."

He stepped toward her, drawn as much by her anxiety as by his own curiosity. "What did you find?"

She answered as she stepped out into the night. "The Guild. . . it goes all the way back to the founding of America."

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*New York Times* bestselling author James RollinsÂ holds a doctorate in veterinary medicine and resides in the Sierra Nevada mountains. An avidÂ spelunker and certified scuba enthusiast, he can often be found underground or underwater. Find James Rollins on Facebook at [www.Facebook.com/SigmaForce](http://www.Facebook.com/SigmaForce), MySpace, Twitter at [www.twitter.com/jamesrollins](http://www.twitter.com/jamesrollins), and at [www.jamesrollins.com](http://www.jamesrollins.com).

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